

UNDERSTANDING LATINA/O IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY IN A WHITE AND WELL-  
RESOURCED CHICAGOLAND SUBURBAN HIGH SCHOOL

BY

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DISSERTATION

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## ABSTRACT

As the largest ethnic/minority group in the U.S., Latina/os are changing the landscape of suburban schools. The changes this population is bringing to suburbia are reflected in its schools. Since 1990, Latina/o student enrollment in suburban schools has more than doubled (Frankenberg & Orfield, 2012, p. 16). Yet, the dominant paradigm in studying Latina/o youth in schools has been through an urban lens. This research reconsiders this approach by distinguishing between urban and suburban. Student participants attend a suburban high school in Chicagoland that is predominately white and well resourced. There is no denying that schools with more means such as some suburban communities can provide more resources for their students but just because there are ample resources does not mean that all students experience them equitably (Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Lewis-McCoy, 2014; Shiller, 2016). Latina/o students experience their schooling differently. Latina/o youth traverse different academic and social terrains that challenge their identity performances. Through a critical ethnographic approach, this study examines how 19 Latina/o youth respond to both whiteness and their Latina/o peers to better navigate their academic and social worlds. Situated within this context, this research is guided by the following two questions: first, how do Latina/o youth at Shields High School (pseudonym) negotiate and perform their identities (e.g., race, class, gender, language, citizenship); and second, what are the ways in which Latina/o youth build and maintain community in their school? My research finds that Latina/o youth are dexterous in the types of identities they perform, but whiteness plays a critical role in creating the context for enacting different modes of silence. Further, youth are acutely aware that they need to “play the game of school” to receive the opportunities and resources their school possesses. Any departure from that renders them as ungrateful and subject to critique and policing. However, youth possess

resilience and innovative agency to create a community for themselves. Examples include reclaiming spaces in their school and resisting whiteness by displaying their culture in ways that are meaningful to them through their language and fashion. I argue that Latina/o youth enact identities and carve out spaces of their own in ways that subvert white supremacy and deficit-based ascriptions and practices rooted in meritocracy, gratitude, and respectability.

*Para mis padres María Virgilia Burciaga y José Guadalupe Rodriguez. Gracias por sus consejos y sus sacrificios. Ustedes han inculcado en mi la importancia en la educación, nuestra cultura, y pusieron el ejemplo en cómo vivir con dignidad.*

*Para mis hermanos Alexis y Ulisses Rodriguez. Los quiero mucho.*

*Finalmente, para mi familia y mis antepasados. Esto no fue posible sin sus sacrificios.*

*For my parents María Virgilia Burciaga and Jose Guadalupe Rodriguez. Thank you for your advice and your sacrifices. You have inculcated in me the importance of education, our culture, and have set the example in living a life with dignity.*

*For my brothers, Alexis and Ulisses Rodriguez. I love you guys very much.*

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## Chapter 1: Notas from the Field: Reflexiones, Dudas, y Convivencia<sup>1</sup>

“Ese vagar sin rumbo por nuestra ‘Mayúscula América’ me ha cambiado más de lo que creí. Yo, ya no soy yo, por lo menos no soy el mismo yo interior.”<sup>2</sup>

Ernesto “Che” Guevara, *The Motorcycle Diaries*

There is a dearth of inquiry on the experiences of Latina/o high school youth who attend schools in the country’s ever-evolving suburban landscape. Part of the significance of this study comes in light of increasing national demographic shifts of Latina/o populations in the last three decades from urban to more suburban locales. An urban lens informs educational discourse, policies, and scholarship on Latina/o youth. Given that most Latina/o youth still attend schools in the country’s largest metropolitan areas, it makes sense that much of the scholarship published focuses on urban schools. At the same, these foci raise critical questions as to whether or not we appropriately understanding youth who live outside of the confines of urban communities.

As will be explained in Chapter 2, urban and suburban neighborhoods are distinct schooling contexts (e.g., building upkeep, financial resources, teacher retention and pay, and academic opportunities). While these differences are real, there is a need to complicate what we know about suburban schooling and push back on assumptions that render all suburban schools as “good” with plentiful opportunities. By recognizing this distinction, there is an opportunity to present a more accurate and nuanced understanding of what Latina/o students experience, think, and how they respond to their schooling. Through a critical ethnographic approach (Madison, 2012), I examine the experiences of 19 suburban Latina/o youth between 2014-2016 who attend

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<sup>1</sup> Translation: Notes from the Field: Reflections, Doubts, & Coexistence

<sup>2</sup> Translation: This aimless wandering through our America has changed me more than I thought. Me, I’m not the same me, at least not the same on the inside.



Shields High School (SHS),<sup>3</sup> a predominately white and well-resourced school outside of Chicago. This dissertation is anchored by two central research questions: 1) How do Latina/o youth at Shields High School negotiate and perform their identities (e.g., racial/ethnic, classed, gendered, and linguistic) in school; and 2) What are the ways in which Latina/o youth build and maintain community within Shields High School? I situate the experiences and bodies of knowledge of Latina/o youth at the forefront because they possess keen insights on their schooling. Latina/o youth are shrewd observers of how their school operates and the problems within them. Accordingly, these questions unpack in earnest the issues schools must grapple with if they are to meet the needs of their students. These questions are not only guided by the academic literature, but also by my own experiences as a Latino growing up in a Chicagoland suburb.

As a means to answer these questions, I turn to anthropologist Norma Mendoza-Denton (2008). She writes, “It is a responsibility of anthropologists to explain ourselves, who we are and where we come from [...]” (p. 43). Rather than place my discussion on positionality as a throwaway section in a chapter or locate it in the appendix, I position it, instead, at the start of my dissertation. I made this decision because it is important that the reader know how I came to this topic and how I reflected on my position as a researcher at SHS. All too often, researchers do not spend enough time complicating their relationships and privileges vis-à-vis their sites and participants. It is also important for the reader to know about me as a researcher and how my experiences and identities informed the conceptualization and implementation of my dissertation. Delgado Bernal and Alemán, Jr. (2017) note that “research is me-search.” They write, “research

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<sup>3</sup> A pseudonym is provided for all identifiable locations, people, programs related to the research process.

often seeks to understand our experiences, our realities, and ourselves.” (p. 9). My time at SHS in suburban Chicago was a formative experience and shaped how I, as a person-researcher, make sense of my time there. In his portrayal of Che Guevara in *The Motorcycle Diaries*, Gael Garcia Bernal says, “Yo, ya no soy yo, por lo menos no soy el mismo yo interior.” I am not the same person as I was when I started my work, and I am thankful for this growth largely because of the participants who served as my maestros<sup>4</sup>. Ellos me han dado una educación<sup>5</sup> and for this, I will always be grateful.

### **Rendered to Singularities: Understanding Self**

Learning and understanding from Latina/o youth at SHS was also an examination and exploration of myself. While not an autoethnography, I spotlight some of my experiences to underscore that my upbringing in Franklin Park, Illinois<sup>6</sup> was instrumental in placing me on a path leading to the fieldwork of my dissertation. Initially, my focus was going to be on youth activism in the suburbs outside of Chicago, but after much reflection I opted to look back into my past, recognizing there was a story to be told. By looking back, I decided to center student voices and experiences by studying identity and their sense of belonging. My collective experiences growing up in Franklin Park afforded me distinct privileges, but I was not immune from Eurocentric dominant ways of schooling that inflicted regular pain on my non-normative identities.

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<sup>4</sup> Translation: Teachers

<sup>5</sup> Translation: They have given me an education for which I will always be grateful for.

<sup>6</sup> Franklin Park is a near western suburb outside of Chicago. The community is composed of middle and lower-middle class families. Growing up, the town was predominately white, but currently has a significant Latina/o, specifically Mexican population along with a growing Eastern European immigrant population, mainly from Poland.

My parents, upon marrying, decided to build a life together in Franklin Park. Their choice was made in part because my dad worked in a neighboring suburb, but also because of what they had been told by some family, that raising a family in my hometown would be safer, cheaper, and would come with more educational opportunities than living in Chicago. My parents rented an apartment for a few years and after I completed kindergarten, we moved into a home my dad purchased in a different part of Franklin Park where my family still resides today.

For much of my elementary, middle, and high school years I attended predominately white public schools. Growing up in a predominately white, middle and lower-middle class community was difficult; it silenced me. Before starting my formal schooling, I did not speak, much less understand English. I have vivid memories of being one of two Latino students in my kindergarten class and being unable to communicate in English, having to rely on pointing and the few words in English I had picked up from watching television or listening to my dad. Moving to a different part of Franklin Park afforded me the opportunity to attend a different school district where I received language support, albeit from the school's social worker. While I am appreciative of her efforts, the embarrassment of having to leave in the middle of class for language instruction felt more like a punishment than an opportunity. As I grew older, I became tired of having to explain to my classmates what I was having for lunch, why my parents dressed me the way that they did, and why I spoke Spanish and not English at home. These and many more instances led to a sense of embarrassment, a rejection of my ethno-racial and linguistic identities at school.

Reflecting on my education, it was clear that I was rewarded for my compliance, and for downplaying my ethno-racial and linguistic identities. I was a student who earned good grades, who was an honor roll student, and who did not get in trouble. I bought into the idea that if I did

well academically, that it would somehow validate me as a person. I am not diminishing the importance of trying and doing well academically in school, but as I grew older, I questioned my motives. The U.S. educational system rewards competition, and I certainly bought into meritocracy-based discourses. Looking back, I wish I had claimed my ethno-racial and linguistic identities that I proudly displayed at home. Slowly and subtly, I felt removed from many of the Latina/o students with whom I went to school. In high school, I was tracked into honors and Advanced Placement (AP) classes, yet, I also had the unique experience of being placed in low-tier math classes and seeing the disparity of attention and education I received in comparison to my science, English, and social studies classes. I dreaded math, not only for my dislike for the subject but because of the ridicule I would receive at times from some of my classmates. In the moment, I would feel alone, angry, and left with a feeling that those who picked on me did so because they did not like school. Upon reflection, I place their teasing in context, knowing that their efforts in part reflected a response to an educational system that had not fulfilled its promise of a good education.

Despite my academic successes, being part of a small number of Latina/o students in my classes was intimidating and lonely. While my consciousness as to the absence of other Latina/o students would not come until later, I was mindful that success was tenuous and always questioned by others. This was especially true with my interactions with my white next-door neighbor, George. The impact he had on me is something I struggled with growing up. On the one hand, he dehumanized me *y mi gente*<sup>7</sup>, yet it was his disdain and bitterness for others that also ignited my political consciousness.

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<sup>7</sup> The impact he had on me is something I struggled with because he dehumanized me and my people.

### **“You’re Nothing but a Product of Affirmative Action”**

I was at home during a summer break during my master’s program sitting in my parents’ backyard. My dad was also outside tilling the soil in preparation for planting tomatoes and peppers when George, came over. He started barking at my dad for neglecting to plant the tomato plants he had given him earlier in the week. It was always unclear when George was joking or being serious as he always seemed to be yelling. But on that day, I had just about had it. I stood up and shouted back and asked him not to talk to my dad in that way. A shouting match ensued. One of my cousins who was visiting played peacemaker and calmed things down and I finally cooled down and joined their conversation.

George and my cousin were talking about gang violence in Chicago, and George, who had an opinion on everything, was telling my cousin that he should give up his social work position at a suburban middle school to work in the city and help solve Chicago’s gang problem. Somehow, the topic returned to me, and George looked at me and said that I had accomplished nothing in life. I did not agree with his statement, it angered me, but I also did not bother fighting back. So, I let it slip, another moment of silencing myself. Then George proceeded to tell me I was nothing but a product of affirmative action. In that moment, I clenched my right fist as anger brewed once more, but I held back. I held back not to silence myself, but out of pity. This was one of the countless moments George manifested his racism. I grew up with his bigotry during my childhood, living in fear, avoiding him when I was younger. As I grew older, I oddly looked forward to our heated political conversations as it helped spark my political consciousness. But eventually, my patience would run out. George’s racism, his bitterness, his lack of empathy, had proved too much to engage with. Not only was it a turning point in my relationship with George, but it was the start of a difficult process of self-liberation.

Growing up in a predominately white community and going to schools with predominately white educators and students, provided few outlets for me to engage in my culture. Being surrounded by whiteness and Eurocentric values, in hindsight, was tantalizing- after all, it was deemed normal by white America. It obfuscated the reality that my investment in whiteness came with my colonization. Yet how does one go about decolonizing the mind? How do we learn to love ourselves in a world that often does not love us back? I began to reflect, read, and dialogue, and I came to realize that this investment was counter-intuitive to my sense of being. While I work toward dismantling these structures of inequality, I am still in the fight of continuing to shed layers of self-loathing, seeking absolution for being complicit in a system that forces us to deny and/or downplay our identities.

This is part of my journey, one that led me onto a path to study it through a set of young people at SHS. These collective experiences proved vital in arriving at my dissertation topic. As I began to think more critically about my past and conceptualize my dissertation, I knew I needed to address some of the complexities and experiences of other suburban Latina/o students. I began to think that other Latina/o youth living and attending suburban schools must have and must be undergoing similar things, putting up with and resisting racist neighbors, teachers who privileged assimilation, and schools that have not created an inclusive environment in which students feel they belong.

### **Entering, Being, & Leaving: Understanding Positionality & Reflexivity at SHS**

In reflecting on my time at SHS, I often felt like a transient interloper. Some of the questions that I often thought about when I entered SHS were:

When's the right time to talk to a student?

Do I join a group for lunch?

When someone is having a bad day, do I talk to them?

Ultimately, who am I to enter their worlds, and why should they reveal their complexities and thoughts to me?

Why should students listen to a dorky and painfully self-deprecating graduate student? Like most graduate students embarking on their dissertation research, the albatross of doubt is ever-present. The questions swirling in my head are not new questions, and they are not questions that will change methodological paradigms, but they are questions that researchers in the field should ask when engaging with their participants.

During my time at SHS, I also was aware and reflected on how I spoke, who I sat with, and how I presented myself to students when I first started my fieldwork. These reflections were important for me to consider in order to examine how students perceived me, how were my actions and words informing the relationships I was attempting to build with students? As Foley (2010) notes, qualitative research, ethnography in particular “is always a performance of sorts” (p. 221). Given the diversity of my student participants, I enacted different performances, particularly in how I communicated. For instance, with some students, we would often code-switch from English to Spanish or vice-versa. Ultimately, I was largely successful in pushing myself to reach beyond my comfort zone by meeting new students. By getting to know them, I earned some level of trust. I hesitate to declare that I had earned their full trust, because ultimately, I was not a student, I was a newcomer to the area, a Ph.D. student who was still benefiting from cultivating a relationship with students. However, when students began to share aspects about their lives, it made my job as a researcher a lot easier. Early in my fieldwork I would berate myself in my notes for not entering the cafeteria to observe and interact with Latina/o students, much less ask them if I could join them. In my analytic memos, I would write things like:

Today, I skipped lunch because I was too afraid to walk up to students and ask. I think this goes back to my anxiety, but also not knowing the students too well yet. Be patient even though you should push yourself more! I need to start making headway in eating in the cafeteria. This will take time, but let's not force it.

A month and a half into to my research, *Jay*<sup>8</sup>, a senior during the first year of the study invited me to eat lunch with his friends. Hearing *Jay* remark, "Mr. Gabriel's coming to lunch!" was a load off my back as I felt like I was making progress in building relationships with students at SHS. By being in *Jay's* world and that of his friends, I got to know them, and they got to know me. The more time I spent with students outside of the classroom, the more they began to trust me. In my time at SHS, student participants would come to reveal their legal status in informal conversations, they would come to share their academic anxieties in their predominately white classes and talk to me about their good and problematic relationships with their teachers. Student participants would also come to learn about me and would support and encourage me to keep going whenever I was having a rough day. If I was hoping for students to share important aspects of themselves, it was obvious to me that I do the same. While some researchers want to remain at a distance from their participants, I desired something different. By listening and engaging students, I built and maintained relationships. By sharing and talking to them about myself, my successes, and my failures, we forged a meaningful participant-researcher relationship.

The process of cultivating trust and building meaningful relationships with students is tough. Once a level of trust is established, it is important that researchers reflect upon what we do with it (Eckert, 1989). Not every relationship is going to be wondrous and impactful in the

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<sup>8</sup> Student participant names are in italics to help differentiate from other students or teachers at SHS. Student participants selected a pseudonym of their choosing.



way we would like. My participants played an important role in dictating the pace, revealing what they wanted to when they wanted to. Additionally, the process of selecting student participants entailed a delicate interplay of interactions. As much as I was trying to figure out if they would be a fit for my research, they too were figuring out what I wanted. After all, they also had a choice to speak to me, to share with me, or to be a participant. As Paris (2011) noted from his fieldwork with youth in South Vista in California, “[...] participants chose to work with me in addition to being chosen by me” (p. 140).

Delgado Bernal’s (1998) work on Chicana feminist epistemology was vital in providing me with affirmation of the importance of the connections I shared with my student participants. Latina/o scholars possess a great vantage point to understand the multi-varied lived experiences of Latina/o students because of the overlap in the negotiations, strategies, and voices to survive educational institutions (Anzaldúa, 2012; Conchas, 2016; Delgado Bernal, 1998; Gonzales, 1999; Villenas & Foley, 2011). Yet, despite coming from a suburban community and experiencing many of the things my participants underwent does not necessarily mean that they would like or trust me. As much as I am an “insider” for being a Spanish-speaking Latino from suburban Chicago, I am also an “outsider” for not having grown up in the area by SHS, for being older than my participants, and for being in a Ph.D. program. Villenas (1996) argues that despite their intentions, all too often researchers produce work that reproduces colonized subjects by “[...] not questioning their own privileged positions” (p. 346). Throughout the research process, reflecting on my positionality and the power dynamics in play between myself, student participants, their teachers, their families, and the community at large, often left me disheartened, overwhelmed, and immobilized. With investment comes attachment. There is no shame in that,

but it is vital to embrace the multiplicities in the research process. Contradicciones<sup>9</sup> are what makes qualitative work difficult, but invaluable to unearth complexities.

As will be discussed in the methodology chapter, I was invested in giving back to students and the adults working at SHS. Helping students succeed was a given for me, but exiting the field was difficult to navigate. How does one go about leaving with some measure that you made an impact? I spent two years collecting field data immersing myself in varied ways to give back to students and their teachers. My third year at SHS was spent working as a teaching aide in special education. While my decision to work at SHS occurred for varied reasons, part of my decision to return, albeit in a different capacity, was that I still had not given everything of myself to my remaining participants, other students, and staff at SHS. Figueroa (2014) notes that ethnographic writing focuses on researchers' personal journeys of entering their respective field sites, yet little attention is given to exiting the field. Figueroa (2014) asks, "Have we acknowledged and fulfilled our responsibility to the communities who have welcomed us? Have we--in both our opinion and the opinion of the participants--fulfilled the commitments we made at the beginning of our study?" (p. 129). While I had earned the respect of my student-participants, how do I begin to show appreciation for all that they have done for me? By being in their classes, hanging out with them outside of class, I became part of their lives and in so doing I was someone who on occasion they turned to for guidance. The process of reciprocity was not done out of a requirement. It was something that came because of the relationships that I had with student participants, but also a practice inculcated in my family of being *acomedido*.<sup>10</sup> I would help students with their homework, talk them through a project they were working on, talk

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<sup>9</sup> Translation: Contradictions

<sup>10</sup> Translation: To be helpful, to help without being asked.

to them about my experiences in college. I would help them on personal statements for school or for college access programs. I ended up co-coaching the school's Latino College Bowl team.<sup>11</sup> My involvement and commitment to the academic and social lives of my participants and other Latina/o students at the school proved to be an invaluable experience, an education that created new areas of inquiry for my dissertation, but also healing and validation in the work that I was doing.

In my work as a teaching aide and as a coordinator of SHS's Alternative Learning Community (ALC)<sup>12</sup>, I interacted with different types of students with whom I did not have much contact when conducting my fieldwork. Many of the students I worked with were Latina/o, particularly male students who were disconnected from their schooling and not particularly invested in the mainstream fabric of SHS. It was an opportunity to learn from students in a different capacity, working to understand their frustrations in and out of the classroom, and helping empower them academically and socially. I also helped co-sponsor two afterschool activities. I helped Mrs. Kahlo and Mr. Velasquez sponsor Latinos Unidos, the school's club for Latina/o students. I occasionally helped run meetings, but my main responsibility was to help coach the Latino College Bowl Team. Alongside Mr. Velasquez, I helped run the Future Saxons Program. This program hired Latina/o high school youth at SHS to serve as mentors to mainly Latina/o middle school students by helping them learn about SHS in hopes of easing their

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<sup>11</sup> The Latino College Bowl team will be discussed in length in Chapter 6, but it is part of SHS' Latinos Unidos club. The team competes once a year against neighboring schools on questions developed by club sponsors. Prior to my arrival questions were developed from PBS' Chicano! Documentary series and now from the Latino Americans documentary series from PBS.

<sup>12</sup> ALC was a small room located in the library that housed students who were taking classes online to catch up with credits they had missed because of having failed a course or a prolonged school absence. ALC was also a space where students serving an in-school suspension would occasionally be sent.

transition to high school. My varied responsibilities in the building allowed me to stay connected with remaining student participants, working alongside SHS educators in search of better outcomes for their students. Often, the responsibilities I took on left me overcommitted and frustrated at times by the lack of understanding or action to support students. But my sense of responsibility along with the relationships I had built with Latina/o students sustained my efforts to advocate on their behalf.

### **Projecting Aspirations: What Students See in Me & What I See in Them**

As much as I was researching the lives of my student participants, they too were studying me. As my mom would say, “no se les va ninguna.”<sup>13</sup> The students at SHS had a strong ethnographic lens of noticing details about my fashion, personality, thoughts, and social life. The attention they gave me, while humbling, was at times uncomfortable. I deemed it important to share things about my life with students; I never fully expected so much interest on their part. Student observations occurred throughout my time at SHS, happening when I walked with them in the hallway, or when I shadowed them in their classes or extracurricular activities. Whenever students would ask questions or make commentary about me, I used those moments as opportunities to learn more about student participants and their lives. These interactions were invaluable to me, particularly early on in my fieldwork. They were an entry point by which to get to know students and for them to learn more about me.

During his pre-calculus class, *Jay* came into his classroom and remarked, “Oh Gabe!” Given his tone and facial expression, his response to me indicated that he was pleasantly surprised to see me. He walked to the back of the room to plug his iPhone to charge. Ms. Andrews started class by asking students if they had any questions from the previous class

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<sup>13</sup> Translation: “Nothing gets past them.”

session. No one had questions, so she had students get into small groups to begin tackling problems. When students began to work with one another, *Jay* asked me when my birthday was, and I told him. He then began commenting on each item of clothing I was wearing and giving it praise with a tone that hyped me up with his white group mates. A neighboring white student overheard and began to laugh. As *Jay* focused on his work, he later stood up to get another worksheet with more problems for his group to work on. As he returned, he smiled, nodded and said, “Gabe looking fresh.” He then noticed that I took a break from my fieldnotes and was checking my fantasy basketball team roster. He wanted to know who was on my team, so we talked about my roster and about the merits of Pao Gasol who, at the time, was as a member of the Chicago Bulls. As class ended, *Jay* stood up, checked his phone, and then said to me, “Gabe, my phone is lightin’ up. My girls are trying to get a hold of me ... my grandma, my mom.” During my time with *Jay* in this class, he shifted in and out of focus of his schoolwork, to engage me in conversation, to ask about my life, to give me praise, and to demonstrate his humor. But I also saw this as a sign that he wanted to include me. By including me, he was telling me about his life, about how he engages his white classmates, how he engages in his schoolwork, and perhaps how he builds community. *Jay* easily could have let me type away, he could have easily answered my questions, but by this point we had developed a healthy rapport that went beyond traditional notions of researcher and participant.

### **Note on Language**

This chapter along with the subsequent ones will feature Spanish and English text. While not the conventional approach to academic writing, I interweave both languages because as Gloria Anzaldúa’s (2012) notes, “I am my language” (p. 81). Anzaldúa’s work in *Borderlands/La Frontera* helps demonstrate the power of interweaving English and Spanish in

her writing. Her hybrid style results in a text that weaves together multiple threads, illuminating the varied ways we can communicate, understand, make meaning, and interpret. In the coming pages, footnotes are attached to Spanish text, but words will *not* be italicized because by italicizing my native language, I relegate it as subservient to English. As Dolores Inés Casillas (2014) argues, “It assumes the readers are monolingual in English. It differentiates the Spanish while affirming English as the norm. I privilege the bilingual reader by refusing to italicize the Spanish” (p. xiii). This mode of communicating offers insight into the hybridity and fluidity of language. At SHS, and in my everyday life, I often transitioned between English and Spanish, but I also interwove both languages in my interactions with participants. I deem it important to do the same in my dissertation, as it is part of who I am and who my participants are. Mixing my way of communicating with student participants facilitated my interactions as we shared a foundation of knowing jokes, consejos<sup>14</sup>, and other cultural references we heard growing up. Moreover, some of the words I employ throughout my work have a richer meaning in Spanish and they convey so much more than the English translation. Of course, not all the Latina/o students with whom I interacted spoke or felt comfortable speaking Spanish. Yet for some, as will be discussed in chapter 5, sprinkling in a few words in Spanish was their way of performing their linguistic identity.

### **The “Paradox” of Latina/o Education: Reviewing Contemporary Understandings**

It almost appears that educational scholarship on Latina/o youth has become a trope; researchers continue to highlight the demographic growth of students and their persistent underachievement in our nation’s public schools. While scholarship has illuminated our understanding of Latina/o students and their surroundings, they continue to vex researchers as to

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<sup>14</sup> Translation: Advice

why they continue to underperform academically. Latina/o students continue to be outperformed by all other ethno-racial groups (Kena et al., 2016). When coupled with the fact that the field remains “woefully underresearched” (Gándara, 2015) there is no question that as the largest and fastest-growing minority group in schools, their stagnant educational performance is worthy of further inquiry. As Gándara and Contreras (2009) observe, “Never before have we been faced with a population group on the verge of becoming the majority in significant portions of the country that is also the lowest performing academically” (p. 18).

There is no paradox of Latina/o education. Historical and contemporary scholarship has clearly delineated how Latina/o students have been denied opportunity and resources due to the structural inequalities favoring “norms” of whiteness that sets minoritized groups as inferior and lacking (Delgado Bernal, 1999; Donato, 1997; Gonzalez, 2013; Nieto, 1998; Nieto, 2013; San Miguel & Valencia, 1998; Yosso, 2006). Scholars are beginning to recognize that before we can understand the achievement gap, we must first understand the opportunity gaps in the lives of students (Carter & Welner, 2013; Contreras, 2011; Lewis & Diamond, 2015). Carter and Welner (2013) write, “A narrow focus on the achievement gap predictably leads to policies grounded in high-stakes testing, which in turn leads to narrow thinking about groups of students, their teachers, and their schools” (p. 3). As Condrón (as cited in Lewis & Diamond, 2015) writes, “we need far more ‘rich detail on processes occurring between and within schools’” (p. 3). Further, my work contributes to the scholarship on Latina/o youth by going beyond achievement and other structural barriers impeding academic success by also highlighting what young people think about schooling. Taines (2011) writes, “Inhabiting schools over long stretches of time, students accumulate detailed, everyday knowledge of their school conditions” (p. 414). This literature review will explore relevant research on Latina/o youth to examine the impact

schooling has on their identities and how youth respond in an effort to better navigate their worlds.

As it will be made clear in the next chapter, the demographics of suburbs across the nation are evolving; they are becoming more diverse and less affluent (Casella, 2014; Kneebone & Berube, 2013; Kneebone & Lou, 2014; Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Shiller, 2016; Wells et al., 2014). These changes are raising key educational questions, yet not enough research has been conducted to better understand suburban schooling in general. “The growth and diversification of the nation’s suburbs has been driven by the huge growth of Latino communities” (Mordechay & Orfield, 2017, p. 197). Latina/o student enrollment in suburban schools has more than doubled since 1990 (Frankenberg & Orfield, 2012, p. 16). Despite these increased enrollments and with 1 in 4 public school students being Latina/o they continue to struggle to find their educational footing (Gándara & Mordechay, 2017). Latina/o student enrollments are helping transform schools across the country, and it is important that we re-examine how we conceptualize the communities and schools these students are now residing in.

It is important that we distinguish suburban from urban to highlight the differences and similarities. As Shiller (2016) writes, “The ground has shifted, and the old ways of understanding the suburbs as spaces of white affluence no longer apply” (p. 9). Posey-Maddox (2016) argues for a more nuanced understanding when engaging in discourse on urban and suburban education. Mainstream discourses and academic literature of label urban schools as segregated, under-resourced, and occupied by low-income Black and Brown students (Noguera, 2003; Posey-Maddox, 2016; Reich, Stenmagen, & Siegel-Hawley, 2014; Watson, 2012). In contrast, suburban schools are labeled as affluent, well resourced, high-performing, and populated with white students (Bettie, 2014; Diamond, 2006; Lewis, 2003; Lewis-McCoy, 2014; Posey-Maddox,



2014; Posey-Maddox, 2016; Watson, 2012). However, this rendering of suburban schools is part myth and part reality (Leonardo & Hunter, 2007; Lewis-McCoy, 2014; Reich, Stemhagen, & Siegel-Hawley, 2014). There is no denying that schools with more means, such as some suburban communities, can provide more resources for their students (Goyette & Lareau, 2014, p. xiii). But, just because there are ample resources does not mean that all students experience them equitably (Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Lewis-McCoy, 2014).

The burgeoning suburban education literature focuses on two areas. The first examines school and district level responses to diversifying student bodies (Diem, Frankenberg, Cleary, & Ali, 2014; Diem, Welton, Frankenberg, & Holme, 2016; Shiller, 2016; Turner, 2015; Tyler, Frankenberg, & Ayscue, 2016). Frankenberg, Ayscue, and Tyler (2016) posit that school responses are contextually based; suburbs are undergoing different patterns of change, highlighting the diversity and complexity in suburbia. For instance, in a study conducted by Frankenberg, Ayscue, and Tyler, (2016) they found that schools are responding to changing demographics by expanding access for their students of color, but the authors complicate their findings by contending that schools also hesitate or choose not to tackle other structural issues such as tracking. Conversely, Taylor, Frankenberg, and Ayscue (2016) observed some school districts advancing race-neutral policies that were not in the interest of their students. The authors advocated for school districts to be explicit in talking about race as their demographics change and to be inclusive in how they create and implement solutions.

The second area of focus centers on studying segregation (Frankenberg & Orfield, 2012; Holme, Frankenberg, Diem, & Welton, 2013; Reardon & Yun, 2001). Frankenberg, Ayscue, and Tyler (2016) write, “[...] we know little about how racial, economic, and linguistic change in suburbia is impacting schools” (p. 384). These trends magnify the importance of understanding

Latina/o students in suburban schools because they could be attending schools that are not willing or able to address their academic and social needs (Frankenberg & Orfield, 2012; Holme, Diem, & Welton, 2014; Wells et al., 2012). Changing demographic patterns in the U.S.'s public schools offer the potential to foster integration, yet as the studies above note, the process is complicated.

While most contemporary research on Latina/o youth and education has focused on schooling in urban schools, existing studies that examine suburban Latina/o youth are scant and mainly focus on acculturation and school success (Carter, 2005; Conchas, Oseguera, & Vigil, 2012; Matute-Bianchi, 1986; Vigil, 1997, 2008). For example, Conchas, Oseguera, and Vigil's (2012) and Vigil's (2008) work highlight the dimensions of acculturation and how Mexican-oriented students had greater academic success. In these studies, the authors note how Mexican and Mexican American students ultimately perform better, when schools take as they put it, "a multilingual and multicultural strategy [...]" (p. 419). Carter (2005) highlights some of the dimensions of identity by noting that while most students believe in the benefits of an education, they project different identities that led to different academic outcomes. In her work, she demonstrates how Latina/o youth who resist notions of "acting white" do so because of their commitment to preserving their own ethno-racial identities, yet educators often interpreted this as students not embracing their schooling. Carter (2005) calls for student identities and culture to be honored and incorporated into the fabric of schools. She also argues for the importance of students to employ the ability to navigate dominant and non-dominant worlds.

While these studies have advanced our understanding of Latina/o students, more research is needed to examine how Latina/o students experience schooling--specifically how identity shifts throughout a school day and how whiteness impacts the presentation of self. Carter (2012)

notes that because research tends to focus on outcomes--looking at test scores or dropout rates--scholars obfuscate the importance of sociocultural issues in the lives of young people. “Without delving into cultural structures of education, however, we undercut our ability to comprehend more fully what factors may very well disconnect a large body of students from schooling and from one another across myriad social lines” (Carter, 2012, p. 5). This dissertation supplements the aforementioned literature by taking a “bottom-up” approach to understanding suburban schooling, focusing squarely on students. Additionally, rather than focusing strictly on academic or social outcomes, this dissertation research will merge the two by understanding how youth navigate both.

The broader research on Latinas/os and education emphasizes the relationship between traditional schooling practices and academic success. This literature finds that schooling silences students (Camarota & Romero, 2006; Fine, 1991; Irizarry, 2011; Irizarry & Raible, 2014; Quiroz, 2001) and forces assimilative practices by subtracting student capital (e.g. Eurocentric curriculum, policing of Spanish) (Valencia, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999), ultimately leading to academic profiling (Ochoa, 2013; Pizarro, 2005). In her work, Quiroz (2001) followed 8<sup>th</sup> grade Latina/o students into the 11<sup>th</sup> grade and had them write autobiographical narratives. In their texts, she found that silencing changed over time, growing more profound, leading students to denigrate themselves and internalize their struggles, having them believe that success was unattainable. Camarota & Romero’s (2006) work is a critical intervention as they argue for a social justice approach in the classroom that engages students in their struggles, helping them see that the structures in place deny them their humanity and success. Part of this silence is attributed to the subtractive nature of schooling.

Valenzuela's (1999) seminal work on Mexican and Mexican American youth allows us to see the process of how schools subtract student capital. Valenzuela demonstrates how schools are organized to have students fail academically. She writes, "[...] schools like Seguin high school are organized formally and informally in ways that fracture students' cultural and ethnic identities, creating social, linguistic, and cultural divisions among the students and between students and the staff" (p. 5). The subtractive nature of schooling exists because of deficit perspectives, and this deficit mode of thinking is critiqued by scholars (Flores-González, 2002; Foley, 1997; Gándara, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Valencia, 2002, 2010; Valenzuela, 1997; Valenzuela, 1999; Valdés, 1996; Yosso, 2005). These authors point out how deficit explanations place the burden of the problem on the individual, family, or culture.

Because of these deficit-based and subtractive approaches, Latina/o youth are silenced, diminishing their academic performance in school and leading to negative profiling. In her work on Asian and Latina/o youth in California, Ochoa (2013) examined how schools talk about Latina/o youth, how they are tracked out of opportunity largely because of deficit perspectives they possess. Her work helps illuminate how educators through additive approaches can honor student identities and create more opportunities for them to excel. My research does not challenge these findings, but rather explores the nuances of how it may become manifest in SHS. There is no question that the body of literature on Latina/o youth in urban schools serves as a model by which to research and understand Latina/o youth identity in suburbia.

Finally, research on Latina/o youth culture and identity has shown how they embody their identities in myriad ways (Bejarano, 2005; Bettie, 2014; Cammarota, 2008; Carter, 2006; Fergus, 2004; Flores-González, 2002; Foley, 2010; Gonzales, 2016; López, 2003; Matute-Bianchi, 1986; Mendoza-Denton, 2008; Nunn, 2011; Olsen, 1997; Valenzuela, 1999). This line of research has

shown how identity formation fluctuates depending on where and who youth are with, but these studies do not conceptualize the impact attending a predominately white high school has on students. Many of the aforementioned studies take place in minority-majority schools where racially minoritized students are the numeric majority or where there is no clear ethno-racial majority. My project supplements existing scholarship by presenting student-centered experiences and perspectives to deepen our understanding on what enactments of identity look like in suburbia and why.

### **Understanding el Cucuy:<sup>15</sup> White Supremacy Setting the Stage at SHS**

Living in a society that constantly privileges whiteness is an exhausting enterprise for Latina/o youth. As Baldridge (2017) notes, “race is an organizing principle of domination” (p. 783). The centrality of race permeates every aspect of our lives, including our interactions in schools. Schools are not exempt from the tentacles of white supremacy and it is important to understand that, “education is administered in a system of white supremacy” (Baldridge, 2017, p. 783). White people because of their racial privilege, “[...] accrue advantages by virtue of being constructed as whites” (Leonardo, 2004, p. 137). With or without their knowledge whiteness confers white people with value upon their body, language, and culture, (Leonardo, 2004) all byproducts of white supremacy. Leonardo and Manning (2017) define white supremacy as a, “[...] socio-historical process that works to ensure white racial domination through various social institutions and through the maintenance of a white racial common sense [...]” (p. 3). White supremacy is a structure that shapes how we engage others, and in tandem, with other privileged structures and discourses (e.g. class, gender, sexuality, language) it can seem like a hopeless

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<sup>15</sup> Translation: Bogeyman. El cucuy is a made-up monster often told in Latino households to scare children.

cause to combat. Yet, Latina/o youth of my study persist, they are survivors and creative in the ways they challenge dominant frameworks.

The notion of binding white supremacy and whiteness at large with *el cucuy* is done so not to trivialize how violent it can be, but to make a connection with an urban legend told to children in many Latina/o homes. This urban legend has often terrified children about the unknown, what lies under the bed or what stands behind the closet door or what lurks in the dark. Similarly, whiteness is always present, both in obvious and in more subtle ways that can be difficult to identify. But if you look closer and decide to interrogate what is often taken as normal you will find a different story. White supremacy like *el cucuy* is always present, shaping how we present ourselves and is a determinant factor in whether we downplay certain parts of our identities for fear of rejection. Given that SHS is predominately white with, I unearth its impact on the identities of Latina/o youth.

By (de)centering norms of whiteness and white supremacy, I interrogate the present realities in the lives of student participants at SHS. As Leonardo (2006) argues merely talking about whiteness and white privilege does not go far enough, it, “[...] must be complemented by an equally rigorous examination of white supremacy [...]” (p. 75). It allows us to not shy away from the conversation that all too often is erased or muted (Pollock, 2004), rendered silent and inconsequential in educational conversations because we are supposedly in a color-blind postracial society. Further, Posey-Maddox (2016) contends that by discussing whiteness we can challenge the idea that race is all about people of color and, “[...] seeks instead to analyze and critique ‘White’ as the often unmarked norm upon which all other racial groups are evaluated [...]” (p. 228). As Lipsitz (1998) argues, many educators have a status quo investment in whiteness, and for those with good intentions, often as Castagno (2014) contends leads to

“powerblind-sameness and colorblind-difference” initiatives that ignore systems of oppression. Wrestling with and dismantling white supremacy in schools is an incredibly difficult task and can seem insurmountable, but simply striving for stop gaps do little to transform and thus further strengthens it. Therefore, by talking about whiteness and white supremacy, we place the burden on those with privilege to work toward divesting from it, working toward eradicating and transforming this oppressive structure.

### **Organization of Dissertation Chapters**

The forthcoming chapters will highlight different dimensions of my fieldwork at SHS. Chapter 2 entitled *Introducing and Unpacking Sites: Understanding the Communities Latina/o Youth Traverse* has two foci. The first is to introduce the reader to the three communities (Lakeview, Northwood, and Fort Holabird) that send students to SHS along with presenting the school itself. Here I use observational and interview data to highlight the complexities of these communities and the high school. Further, to augment this data, I incorporate census data to provide a larger overview of the community. The second point of focus is to complicate suburbia. Perhaps it is stating the obvious that suburban communities vary, yet the suburban imaginary as will be argued is an antiquated one, rife with stereotypes that all too often are unbecoming of its residents and the landscapes they occupy.

Focusing on my theoretical framework and methodology, Chapter 3 is entitled “*What is it that you’re looking for again?*” *Charting and Complicating the Theoretical and Methodological Landscape*. In this chapter, I discuss why I relied on performance and performativity to analyze the identities of Latina/o youth at SHS. Further, in detailing my methodology, I try to do more than write a “lifeless recounting of the procedures that were anything but lifeless” (Paris, 2008). Like Paris (2008), my research interests and questions are not framed by operationalizing

variables; rather, they are formulated to investigate topics in all their complexity and in context (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 2). I devote time toward highlighting the messiness of qualitative research by complicating the research process (e.g. site selection, participant observation) while also discussing my methods for data analysis.

Chapter 4 entitled *Performing Silence: Understanding Silence on a Continuum* examines the role whiteness at SHS plays in shaping what I call a continuum of silence. I explore the varying types of silence Latina/o youth engage in and out of the classroom. The silence youth embody are not acts of disengagement but survival strategies. The chapter also discusses the risks Latina/o youth encounter when they do speak up, particularly when voicing dissent of their school and community.

Chapter 5 entitled “*Sorry not Sorry: The Interplay y Movidas of Performing Authenticity*”<sup>16</sup> highlights the fluidity, hybridity, push-pull feeling Latina/o youth experience. The idea of the in-between, the liminal spaces youth occupy will be the focal point of the chapter. The chapter examines the academic and social identities of Latina/o students by examining key identity issues they experience. Latina/o youth wrestle with what authenticity means to them and their perceptions of how their peers navigate their Latina/o identities in the midst of the whiteness of their school.

Building on the fluidity of identity, Chapter 6 *Entre Nosotros y Entre Ellos: How Latina/o Youth Build and Sustain Community at SHS*<sup>17</sup> focuses on how and where Latina/o youth build community with their Latina/o and white peers. The chapter looks at various spaces throughout SHS where Latina/o students do and do not feel comfortable. Further, I examine

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<sup>16</sup> Translation: “Sorry not Sorry:” The Interplay and Navigating of Performing Authenticity

<sup>17</sup> Translation: Amongst ourselves and amongst them



school initiatives and extracurricular activities to see what community looks like for Latina/o students in those spaces.

Chapter 7 entitled *Critical Romanticism: Where Do We Go from Here?* concludes by summarizing the main findings of the dissertation and discusses the broader theoretical and practical implications of this study. Moreover, the chapter also discusses the tensions, contradictions, and possibilities of critical activist scholarship and the fine line of romanticizing our field sites and participants. The chapter concludes by arguing for what schools can do toward working for initiatives that affirm the complexity of Latina/o youth identities and how to better implement their resources to combat inequality.

## **Chapter 2: Introducing and Unpacking Sites: Understanding the Communities Latina/o Youth Traverse**

Shields High School serves the suburban communities of Lakeview, Northwood, and Fort Holabird. An area recognized for its idyllic bluffs, ravines, and tree-lined streets with elegant homes along the shore of Lake Michigan. This area was chosen as a pleasure ground, a picturesque retreat for Chicago's professional and wealthy elite (Cohen & Benjamin, 2004; Keating, 2008). The very names of the suburbs in this area were selected because they invoked images of the tranquil "sylvan landscape" of the area (Cohen & Benjamin, 2004, p. 18). The three communities that send students to SHS have similarities, but they also have unique characteristics with their own histories. These communities are not apolitical locales, as Carpio, Irazábal, and Pulido (2011) argue suburbs are places of contestation. To understand Lakeview, Northwood, and Fort Holabird necessitates a nuanced understanding of how we conceptualize suburban spaces, how they came to be, how they evolved, and ultimately how historical moments fashioned their contemporary setting.

### **Framing Suburbia**

The transformation of the U.S. into a nation of seemingly endless suburbs comes as no accident. Early American suburbanization, which originated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century stemmed from a desire to separate home from work, a yearning keen on creating and sustaining domesticity in communities far-removed from social and labor unrest and anxieties over immigration found in urban centers. Moreover, technological advances in railways and streetcars and government politics (Kruse & Sugrue, 2006, p. 2) facilitated the first outward movement of people toward "undeveloped" land. These facets of suburban development continued into the post-World War II era.

As scholars have noted, the expansion of suburbanization dramatically increased after the 1930s with the passage of the New Deal (Beauregard, 2006; Hanlon, Short, & Vicino, 2010; Hayden, 2003; Jackson, 1985; Kruse & Sugrue, 2006; Nicolaides & Wiese, 2006; Spiegel, 2001). As the development of suburban communities grew farther away from cities, the federal government played a critical role in encouraging sprawl. As Oliver and Shapiro (2006) note, the government supported suburban growth through taxation, transportation, and housing policies. In effect, “Sprawl became the national housing policy” (Hayden, 2003, p. 151).

The outcome of these advancements and initiatives as Harris (1999) observes left us with suburbs that were mainly white (p. 3). As Jackson (1985) posits, “No discussion of the settlement patterns of the American people can ignore the overriding significance of race” (p. 289). The achievements of the Civil Rights Movement allowed for racial minorities to begin residing within *some* suburban communities but “tools of exclusion” were employed, ranging from local initiatives to federal policy kept out those deemed as threats to romantic suburban ideals (Nicolaides & Wiese, 2006).

Hayden (2003) posits that people have come to see the suburban space as, “the site of promises, dreams, and fantasies. It is a landscape of the imagination where Americans situate ambitions for upward mobility and economic security, ideals about freedom and private property, and longings for social harmony and spiritual uplift” (p. 3). Lakeview, Northwood, and Fort Holabird, like other suburbs across this country are often portrayed as the epitome of what American life should be. The paradigm by which we understand suburbia is one that frames it as a white heteronormative middle-class space composed of home-owning families with children who attend “good” schools and a place where crime is relatively non-existent (Carpio, Irazábal, & Pulido, 2011; Frasure-Yokley, 2015; Harris, 1999; Harris, 2001; Lassiter & Niedt, 2013;

Spigel, 2001; Strauss, 2014; Tongson, 2011). Many suburban historiographies reified this image by only examining those suburbs that adhered to the stereotype mentioned above. In so doing, they provided readers with an incomplete portrait of suburban communities. There is no denying that on the surface many suburban landscapes fit the ingrained stereotype we have received from scholarship and our consumption of film, literature, music, and television (Blauvelt, 2008; Tongson, 2011). I would argue that suburbs are much more than this limited view. Marginalized people reside even in stereotypically white and affluent suburbs. The communities where I conducted my dissertation research are no exception as it will be clearer in the subsequent section. It is important to have a more nuanced understanding of suburban communities because they have always included people of color, low-income people, queer folks, and other marginalized communities. Kneebone and Berube (2013) write:

Low-income residents have long been part of suburban development, from those who were among the first to suburbanize more than a century ago in pursuit of land at the outskirts of urban areas, to members of emerging immigrant enclaves, to residents of blue-collar communities who went to work providing services in more affluent neighboring suburbs (p. 9)

As the authors note, suburbia is not only a site of affluence and domesticity it is also a place of work, a space that serves as home to working-class families, who like their neighbors are flocking to suburban geographies in search of perceived opportunities (e.g., employment, homeownership, education). Unfortunately, multi-ethnic suburbs are racially divided in what Nicolaides and Wiese (2006) call “segregated diversity” (p. 99). In her research on suburbs in the metropolitan Washington, D.C. area, Frasure-Yokley (2015) came to the same conclusion as Nicolaides and Wiese. She writes, “Although a suburb may be characterized by significant

economic and class heterogeneity, affluent and low-income areas within the suburb remain clearly distinct and, most important, starkly divided by race and ethnicity” (p. 130). For Latina/o communities in suburbia, it is important to keep in mind that they too have traditionally resided in less affluent suburban communities, often living in the, “most deteriorated areas” of these suburbs (Betancur, 1996). As Latina/os continue to populate suburban communities throughout the country it is important not to forget that not all suburbs are created equal; they come with variations (e.g., demographics, employment, housing) (Harris, 1999; Jackson, 1985; Orfield, 2002). As Frey (2015) notes, living in a suburb come with no assurances of a middle-class style life. In fact, the suburban poor now outnumber poor individuals and families in cities, 47% of racial and ethnic minorities in poverty live in the suburbs (Kneebone & Lou, 2014).

### **Latina/os Changing Suburban Demographics**

Scholarly attention across disciplines has been devoted to understanding working-class and middle-class Latina/o populations living in the suburbs (Agius Vallejo, 2012; Carpio, Irazábal, & Pulido, 2011; Cheng, 2013a; Cheng, 2013b; Frasure-Yokley, 2015; González, 2018; Macias, 2006; Poral, 2006; Saito, 1998; Singer, Hardwick, & Brettell, 2008; Troche-Rodriguez, 2009). While it is important to note the social mobility of these populations, it is equally important to examine the experiences of the working class or newly arrived immigrant families and residents, because despite the successes of Latina/os in suburbia, Nicolaides and Wiese (2006) note that, “[...] Latino suburbanization is belied by segregation and fiscal inequality” (p. 5). As the largest ethnic minority group in the U.S., demographers project the Latina/o population will double by 2050 (Passel & Cohn, 2008). Therefore, how will the legacies of discrimination impact sustained settlement of Latina/o people in suburbia? Despite declining immigration rates, the Latina/o community continues to grow from births in the U.S. (Krogstad

& Lopez, 2015). In addition to being a source of population growth, Latina/os are also younger than most other ethno-racial groups, with a median age of 29 years (Krogstad & Lopez, 2015). Less known is that 59% of immigrant and non-immigrant Latinas/os are settling in the suburbs rather than in cities (Lassiter & Niedt, 2013, p. 3). As Pulido et al. (2011) argue:

While Latinos have always settled in suburbs to some degree, there has been a significant intensification occurring as a result of deindustrialization and rising housing costs in the last three decades. This shift derived from both private land development and the relocation of industry to the suburbs (p. 189).

While past generations of Latinas/os opted to migrate and settle in large urban cities like Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles, or New York, today's generation resides in neighborhoods that provide greater opportunity to work and live. This is not to say that opportunity does not exist in big or smaller cities. In fact, Latina/os have fueled population growth in cities like Atlanta, Charlotte, Nashville, Raleigh, and Memphis (Frey, 2015). In the Chicago area, Latinas/os are not confined to living in inner-core suburbs<sup>18</sup> that border the city; they are moving to communities far away from the city as well. Latina/os are helping reshape suburban communities, particularly predominately white communities by turning them into what Wei Li (2009) calls, "ethnoburbs," suburban clusters that as she notes, "[...] replicate some features of the ethnic enclave and some features of a suburb without a specific minority identity" (p. 29).

Illinois is no exception to the changing demographics occurring in its suburban communities. As of the last census in 2010, nearly 1 in 6 people living in Illinois are Latina/o (Hall, 2012, p. 13), comprising 16% of the total population (Chapa, 2012, p. 23). While

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<sup>18</sup> Inner-core suburbs are those which surround a major city, in this case an inner-core suburb is one that borders the city of Chicago.

immigration from Latin America has declined since 2000, the population continues to grow based on births in the U.S. Because of the relative youth of the Latina/o population, Chapa (2012) projects that because more than one-third of the population is under the age of 18, the population will continue to grow.

According to Hall (2011), the growth in the Latino population has accounted for about three-fourths of all growth in the state (p. 13). The growth of the Latina/o population is no longer restricted to the confines of Chicago's city limits. Latina/o populations are bypassing the city and opting to live in the many suburbs outside of Chicago. As early as the 1980s, Latina/o growth has been faster in the suburbs than in Chicago, and by 2004 a majority were living in the Chicagoland suburbs (Ready & Brown-Gort, 2005). In the county in which this study takes place, Latina/os comprise 19.9% of the total population (Hall, 2011), and since 1980 the population has grown 332% (Krysan, Hall, & Washington, 2010). Latina/os have been flocking to this county and others across the Chicagoland region because of both the perceived and real opportunities they offer.

### **Lakeview**

To get a deeper sense of the community Latina/o youth live in, I decided to rent an apartment in Lakeview during the second year of my study. Attempting to find an apartment proved to be challenging. Not many apartments were available given my fixed income. Eventually, I settled on a studio apartment in downtown Lakeview. I was quickly enamored with Lakeview. As a runner, I was excited about the prospect of exploring the community. On my runs throughout Lakeview, I marveled at the natural beauty of the area, and my running often gravitated to the lakefront. The eastern part of town features a topography composed of bluffs overlooking Lake Michigan, ravines depositing their water into the lake, and trees lining several

streets with homes that were built in the late 1800s. Upon closer inspection, more details emerge, and dimensions present different stories. On my runs throughout this part of town I would see brick driveways with high-end sedans and sports utility vehicles (SUVs) (e.g., Audi, Acura, BMW, Infiniti, Mercedes-Benz, Tesla) and homes with expansive adorned plots that came alive during the spring and summer. On my runs, I encountered beaches that required non-residents to pay a \$40 daily parking fee, and I found that private residents whose large homes sit atop the bluffs overlooking the lake own many parts of the lakefront in Lakeview. In snaking around these blocks, I saw signs marked with “private driveway” or “no outlet,” signs of demarcation telling me that I was not to go down those paths. On any given weekend, I saw droves of white people on expensive road bikes wearing the latest cycling gear, the occasional runner, or people walking their dogs. On my runs, it was infrequent to see people of color, if I did they would be walking children whom they took care of, entering homes to clean them, or servicing the yards of some of the homes in the area. When my runs took me away from the lakefront; they took me to places that presented different dimensions of Lakeview.

My runs often started in Lakeview’s downtown. As a resident of the area, I lived in the middle of all the “hustle and bustle.” The central portion of Lakeview features its lively downtown anchored by a train station that transports residents into Chicago for work and pleasure. Small businesses mostly occupy the buildings in Lakeview. Downtown has some large chain businesses like Chipotle, Panera Bread, and Starbucks, but the majority are locally owned clothing boutiques, restaurants, and specialty shops. During the holiday season, the trees lining downtown Lakeview’s main street are lit with Christmas lights carefully wrapped around the branches. Throughout these streets, people hopscotch from store to store; on occasion, you will hear a customer place an order or ask for an item of clothing and speak through the worker.



While not the norm, it is certainly part of the entitlement that exists in Lakeview. In the downtown area is a local grocery store that catered its services to white customers with means. Although within walking distance of my apartment, I rarely shopped there because of its higher prices. I was also uncomfortable when I would get in line to pay for my goods to have my cart taken away from me from their mainly Latina/o staff. It was uncomfortable seeing employees take food out of other people's carts and seeing them place it on the conveyor belt for purchase. It was also, striking to see how often white clientele asked employees to load their vehicles with groceries. I would also come to find out that customers could call the store, place their grocery order and when they arrived would have their goods loaded into their vehicle. This example is reflective of some of the racial and class dimensions of Lakeview. Most of the people navigating downtown are white people who play the role of customer, while brown faces are in the background cooking, cleaning, or serving. Downtown is a trendy space that prices out those with less means.

In looking at the vehicles, you see university stickers on rearview windows, as well as stickers of summer or sports camps students attend during the summer. You notice that many structures in Lakeview are old and newer buildings mimic those of older generations. People strolling the sidewalks of Lakeview often wear trendy and elite brands of clothing-Lululemon yoga pants, The North Face, Patagonia, or Canada Goose winter apparel and will carry Starbucks drinks or Swell water bottles. While my runs down the streets of downtown and east Lakeview reified mainstream suburban images, my running also took me to an adjacent set of blocks that complicate our understanding of "traditional suburbs." This part of Lakeview featured homes that were smaller. These were homes that were occupied mainly by Latina/o families. Several of the homes are moderately sized, but I would come to find that they house several families. The

homes are closer to one another, with less green space separating them from the street. Here, I would not see signs telling people to stay away or homes with expansive yards. The vehicles park in the smaller driveways or on the street. These vehicles feature less expensive, older sedans and SUVs (e.g., Chevrolet, Ford, Honda, Toyota). Some of the vehicles had window decals telling others their last name or what part of Mexico they were from. Latina/o families did not own many of the homes in this area. In speaking with community members, many of the houses in this area owned by an individual who residents call a “slum lord.” Continuing north, smaller apartment buildings and homes also serve as home to other Latina/o families. These homes and apartments are found along main thoroughfares in town. My longer runs in Lakeview would take me to its other borders, to the south, west, and north many of the homes blended together. Many of these homes featured driveways with larger yards that for the most part were well kept. But these homes were middle-class in nature. I would see less affluence in these neighborhoods, fewer high-end vehicles, less dependency on people of color to help with upkeep.

Lakeview is a middle and upper-middle class suburb with a population of 29,763 (U.S. Census, 2010). Lakeview residents have a median household income of \$115,382, and the median value of homes is \$511,5000. 6.7% of the population lives below the poverty line (2010-2014 American Community Survey 5-year estimates). Lakeview is mainly composed of white residents (83.7%) with Latinas/os being the second largest group (7.3%) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). According to the 2008-2012 American Community Survey, 56.6% of Lakeview residents hold employment in white-collar jobs. Regarding educational attainment, 96.2% of Lakeview inhabitants have a high school diploma or higher.

Another distinguishing feature of Lakeview is its Jewish community. Historically communities in the area refused Jews entry, but this town was different. As Ebner (1988) notes,

“[...] it was the inclusiveness and social conscious of Lakeview (Pseudonym added) that distinguished it as a community” (p. 220). This legacy still permeates today in how the town views itself as an open, politically liberal, and inclusive community. While not a numeric majority, the Jewish community maintains an active presence in town, as you will see Jewish owned businesses and synagogues. Despite this rich history, Lakeview has a history of exclusion.

For example, conversations with residents and student participants, along with my own observations and experiences as a resident of Lakeview, I would come to find that several Latina/o families were impacted by housing discrimination. In the homes described above, one of my participants, *Bob the Builder* and his family were evicted from their homes because the owner decided to sell the buildings he owned on that block to make way for the erection of a condominium complex. During the second year of my study, *Bob the Builder's* family would end up moving twice and were in the process of being forced out of their second dwelling after the owner of their apartment in Northwood breached their contract. This issue is not a new phenomenon and is part of larger issues (e.g., lack of political representation, social isolation, and poor working conditions) Latina/o and their immigrant counterparts often encounter (Ramakrishnan & Wong, 2010). Because of the expensive nature of the area, Latina/os have few affordable options of where to live thus compounding the difficulties of housing in this area. Despite the small size of the Latina/o community, various organizations are in place to support it as well as the Northwood Latina/o community. There is a legal aid clinic, which offers support to undocumented immigrants along with a non-profit that provides myriad resources ranging from counseling to youth services.

## Northwood

To the north of Lakeview is Northwood, a small community with a majority Latina/o population. In my runs in Northwood, I was struck by how distinct it was from Lakeview. In writing about Northwood, Ebner (1988) characterized it as a community “out of place” because its architectural, demographic, and geographic features do not parallel those surrounding it. Unlike Lakeview, Northwood does not have a vista of the lake, nor does it possess large homes built for Chicago’s elite. Beginning in the 1920s Italians, mainly from the province of Modena supplanted the Swedes, Irish, and Germans who came before them. As Bernardi (1990) notes, Italian immigrants came to work for the wealthy in the area (p. 2). Residents helped build and maintain the houses of Lakeview. Given Northwood’s small boundaries, many of its homes are built close to one another. Unlike Lakeview’s predominately white populace, Northwood’s demographics have shifted from majority Italian to majority Latina/o. Throughout Northwood I would see more brown faces that not only worked in the community but also lived in it. The residential streets in Northwood are narrow, with vehicles parked on them. The vehicles traversing the streets are not as new. They are older. They show signs of wear and tear. Moreover, many of the ones I saw were also trucks. Several of the trucks were used for work, for those that worked in landscaping or in the winter for snowplowing in the area. Unlike the high-end sedans and SUVs that populate Lakeview, those were seen in Northwood’s downtown area when their occupants came to dine or were driving through Northwood to get to another suburb. The residents of Northwood were likely to drive vehicles from the late 90s or early to mid-2000s such as Jeep Cherokees, Fords, Chevys, Hondas, or Toyotas.

Many of the homes in Northwood are smaller in comparison to those I saw in Lakeview. In my runs, I would snake around blocks in Northwood to get a deeper sense of these homes.

Several of the homes were narrower in nature and closer to each other. The homes in Northwood also lacked uniformity, speaking to the eclectic architectural style of homes in the community. While several homes in Northwood housed single families, others were home to more than one. Interspersed would be small apartment buildings as well. While I would occasionally see children and teenagers playing or hanging out in Lakeview, Northwood had more vibrancy. The likelihood of seeing people walking, children playing outside was higher. Northwood's two primary downtown streets feature a plethora of dining and drinking options. Long known for its bars, Northwood was once labeled as a "bad" community given that the surrounding communities were dry towns. Presently, many bars exist, attracting white people from in and out of the community; the restaurants lining the streets are a source of pride for Northwood. Several of the businesses have apartments on top of them, which also house Latina/o families. Unlike the businesses catering to the shopping interests of the affluent white population, Northwood draws them in for food. A mixture of fine dining options featuring Italian restaurants, and several Mexican restaurants, are popular among white and Latina/o residents. Of interest for youth in the community was a hot dog joint which served a mix of fast food and tacos. Another local favorite was a local pizzeria. All but three of Northwood's businesses are locally owned. You will quickly notice the legacy of Italian immigration as many of the businesses bear Italian surnames.

Downtown Northwood also features a train station. Unlike the recreational cycling I witnessed in Lakeview, people on bikes in Northwood use them as a mode of transport to go to work rather than for leisure. A couple of small *tienditas*<sup>19</sup> exist in Northwood, yet for larger, cheaper selections residents drive to neighboring suburbs with larger *supermercados*<sup>20</sup>. These

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<sup>19</sup> Translation, small stores

<sup>20</sup> Translation, supermarkets

small stores are hubs for the Latina/o community, and in walking into them, I got a different sense of community. I would hear workers and customers communicating to one another in Spanish, with music in Spanish being played in the background, many of the products catered to their mainly Mexican population. These spaces were communal, yet as previously stated these commercial areas were few and far between. Many of the Latina/o families would travel to a nearby suburb for greater grocery and restaurant options. This community was also one that residents of Northwood would commute to in order to visit family.

Northwood also draws out community members for its annual fall festival, its weekly farmer's markets, and other summer festivals that are attended by white and Latina/o families. These are part of the town's larger efforts to market itself as a place to go out and eat, but in so doing they are also pricing out Latina/o families who have fewer places to shop, dine, and that appeal to their needs.

The old Italian guard still holds significant power in Northwood, but it now shares the town with Latinas/os, mainly of Mexican origin from the southwest states of Guerrero and Michoacán. Much like their Italian predecessors, many Latinas/os living in Northwood work for those with more resources. With a population of 5,405, Northwood residents hold a median household income of \$54,176 (2010-2014 American Community Survey 5-year estimates). Unlike Lakeview's majority white population, 56.9% of Northwood residents are Latina/o. 37.8% of Northwood residents hold employment in service sector and blue-collar jobs. In the 1980s, migration shifted to Mexican and more recently Guatemalan populations. Many of the families come from the same small towns in Guerrero and Michoacán, and many students at SHS have family ties. Despite the significant Latina/o population in Northwood, the town is being gentrified. At the northern edge of town are several apartment buildings that once housed

predominately Latina/o families, informally known as “Taco Tower.” Now, this apartment complex houses young, typically white professionals. A brief review of their paper and online advertisements indicate that the apartment company is catering to a young professional crowd.

While I did not attend their services, in speaking with Latina/o participants and community members, Northwood’s Catholic Church plays an important role in the community. Its parishioners attend regularly, and its attendance has increased since Spanish mass in Lakeview’s Catholic Church was shuttered. The church offers Zumba classes to the Latina/o community as well as hosting a Latina/o youth group.

### **Fort Holabird**

Fearing revolution after the Haymarket Riot of 1886, Chicago’s elite, including several that called Lakeview home, persuaded the War Department to construct a fort to protect their interests. The Commercial Club of Chicago bought 632 acres of land in Northwood and donated it to the federal government to build Fort Holabird (Bernardi, 1990; Cohen, 2004; Ebner, 1988). What started as an effort to maintain order stemming from fears, the fort served its purpose, but remained open and was supported out of patriotic duty by those living in Lakeview (Ebner, 1988, p. 144).

Although the fort is now closed, it is still a fixture in the area. While a significant portion of the land was sold for development purposes, a portion of the land remains owned by the federal government and still operates as a training facility. While people in the community call this area Fort Holabird, it does not have its own governing body. Lakeview, Northwood, and a small portion of a third community have jurisdiction over it. Yet, upon entering the main entrance to this community, a sign on a brick arch entryway says, “Welcome to the Town of Fort Holabird.” The community demarcates itself from Lakeview and Northwood despite its lack of

actual autonomy. The area features a prairie overlooking Lake Michigan along with large brick homes that used to be occupied by military officers and their families. The old military barracks have been converted into high-end apartments and townhomes. The southern part of Fort Holabird features newer, smaller, cookie-cutter dwellings that house active service members of the military. SHS students from this area are known as “fort kids.” The nomenclature serves as positive labeling, a sense of pride in a family’s military record as well as a label for a group of students that are not necessarily part of the Lakeview and Northwood fabric. Moreover, the small numbers of Black students who attend SHS mainly come from this part of Fort Holabird. The northern part of Fort Holabird is mainly white. This town, particularly the northern part possesses a stereotypically suburban domesticity, as there are no businesses in Fort Holabird.

The descriptions of the three communities, which stand in contrast to one another, provide contexts for understanding the types of students who attend Shields High School. The students reflect the varied communities from which they grew up and adopt many of the norms transmitted from their parents and others with whom they interact.

### **Shields High School**

**The outside.** Located in northern Lakeview, SHS is surrounded by homes on the north and east like the ones I described in this community earlier in the chapter. The west features apartments that house some Latina/o families along with a more middle-class residential area and a hospital a short distance away. Also, to the immediate west of the school is a paved trail that many of the students use on their walk to and from school. Upon walking or driving to the school, students pass underneath railroad tracks of the train that passes through the three communities. One of the walls of this underpass features a mural that was spray painted by a Mexican student in 2012. The mural was funded by a community organization that partners with



SHS to help Latina/o youth. In a local online newspaper, one of the students commissioned to spray paint was asked about his motivation. He responded with, “The mural represents the Latino heritage and is trying to promote its culture” Moreover, a representative from the organization funding the mural thought it was, “[...] an opportunity for students to feel that they’re part of this community and that they have something to add.” When I first came to the school, I was pleasantly surprised to see a mural, much less one evocating images created by Latina/o youth.

**Figure 1: Photograph of Mural Outside of Shields High School**



In the background is the Chicago downtown skyline with a pyramid featured prominently in the center. In the forefront of the mural is a student in graduation regalia holding up his diploma to the left are three birds, an eagle, quetzal, and a road runner. There is also a nopal<sup>21</sup> and an image of a person with their back to the viewer, presumably a campesino.<sup>22</sup>

In front of the school, there is a large field used by gym classes and sports practice for some teams at SHS. The front of the school has an electronic sign with the school’s name; the

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<sup>21</sup> Translation: prickly pear cactus

<sup>22</sup> Translation: farmer

electronic board displays messages of school pride in English and Spanish. Also, in the front of the school is a small play area that is used by the children of some community members and SHS staff who are enrolled at SHS's preschool. To the west of the building is a staff parking lot; around the building at the back of the school is a much larger staff and student parking lot. During my first year at the school, there was student and parental pushback, particularly from white students and their parents. As the school embarked on a construction project, they were upset over the subsequent reduction in student parking. In the student lot, you will see several Audis, BMWs, Mercedes Benz, among other high-end sedans and SUVs that are adorned with SHS, various university, camp, and sports camp stickers. At times, it appeared that some of the student body drove more high-status cars than some of the teachers in the building. Students who take school buses are dropped off at the back of the school; white students populate these buses along with a higher number of Latina/o students who live too far to walk.

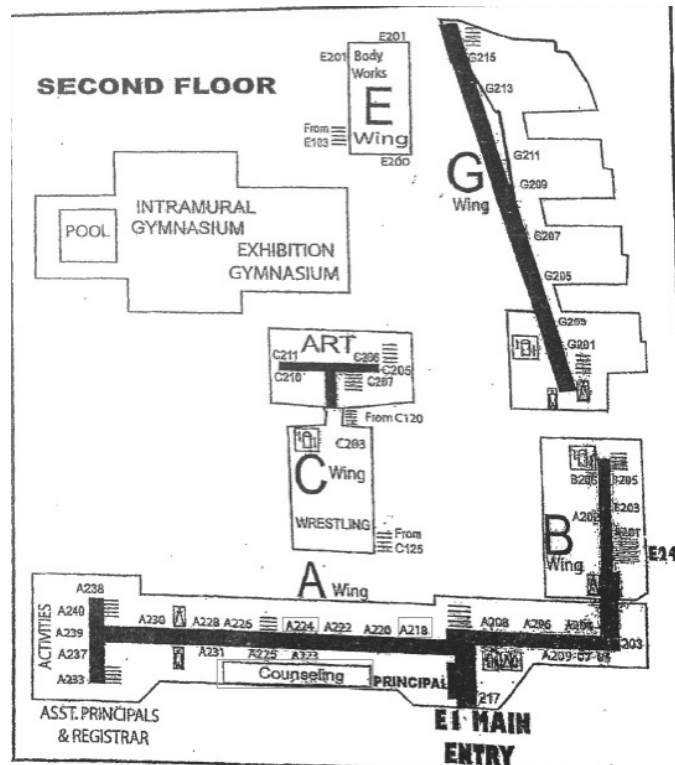
On any given day before and after school, traffic increases and causes a hectic, mini-traffic jam as people drop off or pick up students. The congestion was a point of contention among community members, particularly as the school expanded their construction efforts the second year of data collection. The issue was addressed by hiring additional staff to control car traffic and by installing a couple of Lakeview's police force to regulate traffic. Many Latina/o students from Northwood walk and some use the trail. Others are dropped off and others take the bus. For those that live in Lakeview, much is the same. While no census exists to account for how many Latina/o students elect to drive, few students can park in the student lot given the prohibitive cost of \$360. Those who do drive park on a neighboring street where it is free. Sammy, who moved to the area half-way through the first year of data collection from a less affluent west suburban community, remarked that with all the money that is collected, the school

should provide free car washes. He went on to say that parking was free at his former school. Although not a participant of this study, Sammy's observation as a newcomer to SHS highlight how quickly certain types of privilege are noticeable. On one of my first few days at the school, I could not help but notice the clear class differences at SHS. On my first day leaving the school, I saw the stream of cars lined up at the front of the building to pick up students. I saw several high-end sedans and SUVs and interspersed I would see vehicles associated with middle-class families such as Honda or Toyota.

The brick building itself stands at two stories or three depending on what wing you look at. SHS's newer sections feature more windows, creating an aesthetically pleasing and welcoming environment. In the science wing, there is a small prairie-like courtyard with a small set of chickens and turtles that are frequented by science classes. The school's construction project saw the teardown and building of new academic wing and the erection of a new fieldhouse. The school's new pool can be seen from the street facing the front of the building given its glass walls.

**The inside.** The front entrance of SHS features a series of doors, yet most are underused as people are directed to the doors on the left as all that enter must pass through a security vestibule installed a few years back. This vestibule at times creates congestion in the morning since people do not go through the main doors but can to do so when exiting the building at the end of the school day. For visitors, they must check in with school security. They are asked to supply identification which then is scanned and are provided with a badge to carry with them as they walk in the building. It is also worth noting that none of the entrances at SHS are equipped with metal detectors, although security cameras are found throughout the building's hallways and exterior.

**Figure 2: Map of 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor of Shields High School**



Once in the security vestibule, one has the choice of exiting through a door that leads to the principal's office, the counseling department, and staff mailboxes. The other door leads into the school's front lobby. This part of the school is considered the second floor, as seen in Figure 2 above, the second floor has different building wings: A, B, C, G, and E. In the A wing of the school are SHS's administrative offices along with those of the counseling department. Moreover, A wing is also composed of classrooms used by primarily by the math and special education department. During my time at SHS A wing was also home to the Greenberg Achievers Program,<sup>23</sup> a college access program and The Learning Center, a space created by the school for students to do work and receive tutoring. Both will be discussed in greater length at Chapter 6. B wing was home to classrooms used by social studies and math department. C wing

<sup>23</sup> During the second year of the study, the Greenberg Achievers Program moved to the third floor as the school embarked on a large construction project.

was home to fine and applied arts classrooms and a small gym used by some of the athletic programs for practice. G wing featured the school's auditorium, classrooms for the science department. G wing in comparison to the other wings in the building was newer. In talking with school staff, this section of the school was rebuilt as part of a construction effort in the 1990s. On the left-hand side of G wing are large windows allowing for sunlight to light the hallway. E wing was a smaller building that had a couple of classrooms used by the fine and applied arts department and housed the school's yoga studio.

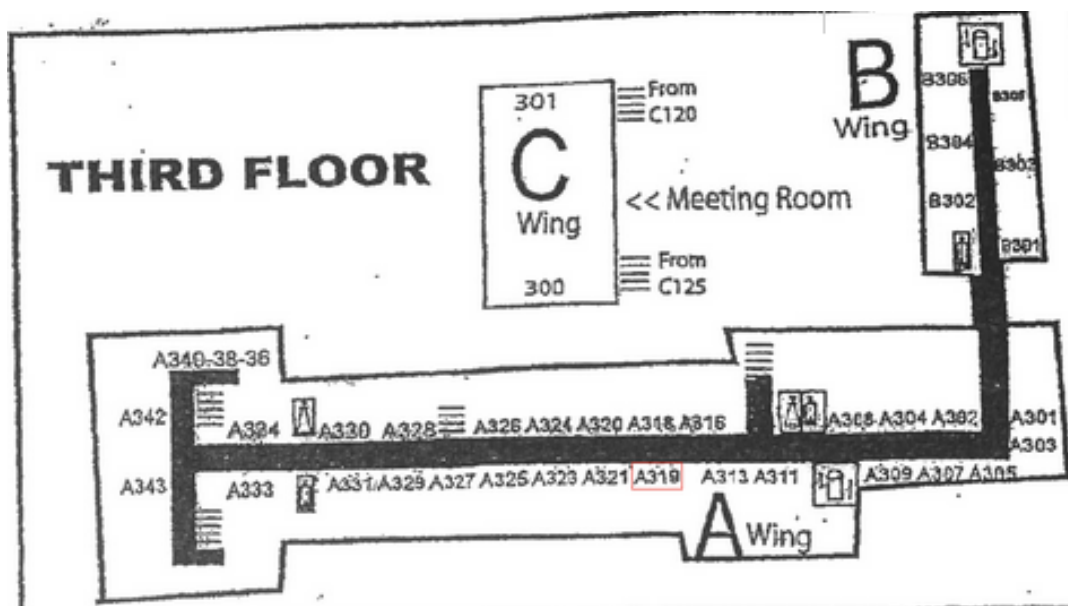
The hallways of the various wings of SHS's second floor were lined with blue lockers, white floor tile, school flyers, water fountains (some of which had a water bottle refillable feature), along with occasional quotes painted onto the wall instilling school pride. Many of the doors of the classrooms had small flyers with reminders for students to go to a different part of the school for class, inspirational quotes, and stickers. During my time at SHS, a school social worker Mrs. Kahlo and one of the school college counselors Mrs. Lennox led an initiative to educate staff on learning about undocumented students and how to be an ally. Because of this professional development opportunity some of the staff in these wings, particularly in the social studies wing placed stickers in support. I did not see many in the math department or science wings of the school.

**Figure 3: Picture of Image outside of Ms. Emerson's Classroom**



The third floor of the building featured similar topography featured on the second floor. The third floor was home to the English, social studies, world languages, and English Language Learner departments.

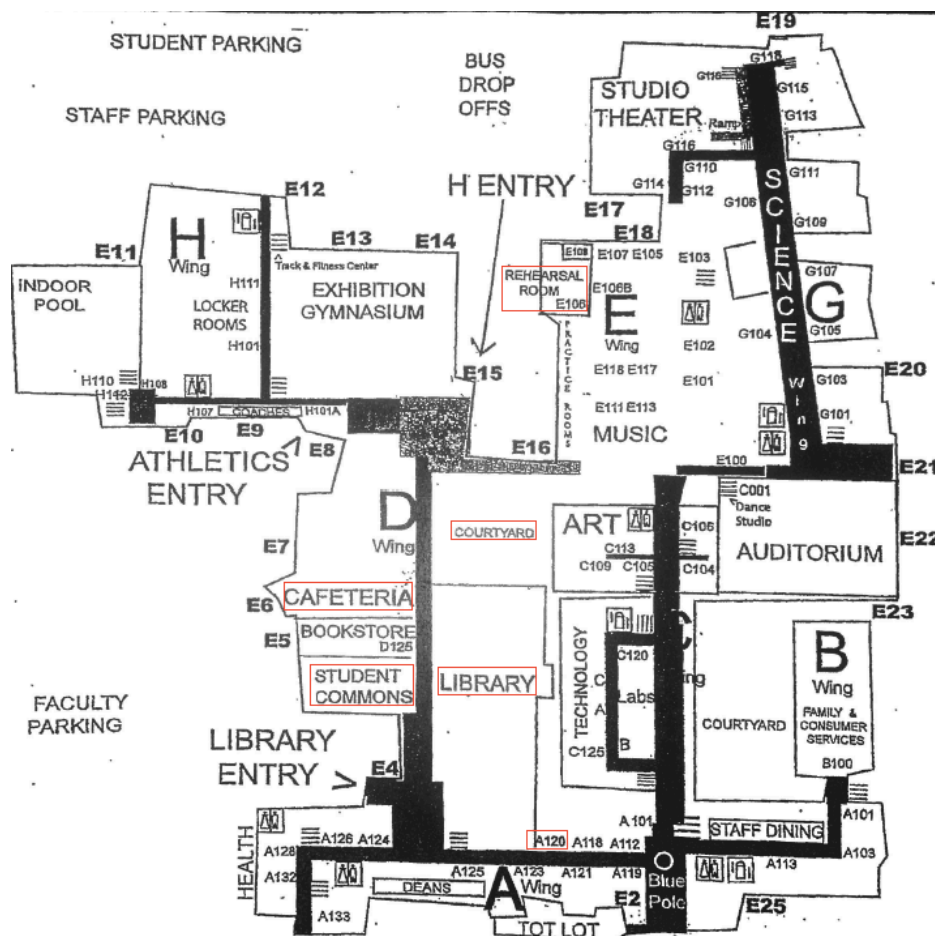
**Figure 4: Map of 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor of Shields High School**



On the left-hand side of the image are two small auditorium style rooms used by teachers when they wanted to show a movie, club events, or to hold parent meetings. The hallways of A and B

almost all featured flyers and stickers in allyship to undocumented students on classroom entryways. In between Rooms A319 and A313 is a table with a few chairs, this was a space that at times, particularly before school started where some of the Latina/o students in the English Language Learner program hung out. Moreover, A319 also served as the English Language Learner Resource Room. This was a space that was used for classroom purposes, but whenever it was not used ELL students would come hang out and eat their lunches. The hallways on this floor before school would at times feature white students sitting on the floor doing school work or conversing socially. The ground floor of the building presented more of the segregated racial dynamics of the school to play out.

**Figure 5: Map of Ground Floor of Shields High School**



The A wing portion of the ground floor featured the Deans office, which often was visited by Latina/o students who were disciplined more than their white peers. While not the focus of my study, staff and students were aware of this disproportion. A wing was also home to the school's Multi Media center which was a safe space for some Latina/o students to hangout during their lunch. Often it was students who did not fit nicely into any social group category. A wing was also home to a group of predominately white male students who were interested in card games like Pokémon or interested in being part of SHS TV.<sup>24</sup> On the right-hand side of Figure 4 is what the school called the "blue pole." It was a source of school pride as students often wrote positive messages or their names as part of SHS school culture. Often, it was white students who wrote their names on the board, but Latina/o students also participated in this tradition. Typically, it was youth were more connected to mainstream SHS culture. Several special education classrooms were in this wing as well. In this area of the school, was a self-contained classroom used by students in the school's Alternative Education Program. These were students that were assessed to have behavior issues too disruptive to be in mainstream classes. Referred to by Latina/o students as "the cage," many of the students in this classroom were Latino male youth who struggled academically in school. D wing presented the most overt segregated space in the school, which was well known to staff and students. These dynamics will also be explored in Chapter 6. The school library is used heavily by most of its students. Students come and go during free periods to work on group projects, to work on homework, to take a nap, to play chess, among other activities. In talking with students at the school, several students - not just Latina/o students - took issue with how librarians enforced rules, often feeling that they were

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<sup>24</sup> SHS TV was run by two of the three staff members of the Multimedia Center and provided students the space to run their own ads and run the school announcements. Announcements were sent electronically to staff and projected by them onto a dry erase board or smart board.



silenced too much or felt they were being punished for no reason. While Latina/o students used this space commonly, white youth tended to occupy the common areas more often and did so more audibly. The commons were occupied by popular white students during the lunch periods, but then, Latina/o and Black youth reclaim that space after lunch periods and use the space to hang out and complete their school work. The cafeteria is a more diverse space but also is segregated along racial and gender lines. There are benches in front of the cafeteria that are used by Latina/o youth that typically get labeled as apathetic or as troublemakers. By H Entrance is a lobby that features a mural that was painted during the first year of the study. It was commissioned as an effort to highlight some of the issues occurring in the country and SHS's efforts.

**Figure 6: Image of SHS Mural**



The mural was done by an alum of the high school who had returned as part of the school's biennial arts festival. The mural presents a message emphasizing the importance of "peaceful protest" of "love" and featured what the school called, "Line the Streets for Justice and Peace." The mural also featured its anti-bullying campaign, its Pledge Drive initiative of fundraising for

community organizations. The mural is located in an area that is used by white female students during the lunch periods as well. E wing featured several classes for the fine and applied arts department and the orchestra, band, and theatre spaces are also locales used by varied white cliques during lunch periods. Latina/o youth are not a large presence in these spaces, but a few students do eat lunch there.

The school was one that was navigated differently by its students. Many of these dynamics will be explored in Chapter 6 but suffice it to say that despite the numeric majority white students have over Latina/o youth and other youth of color in the building, white students took up more space, while popular white students pushed out other white social cliques to multiple spaces throughout the building. Raising questions about how Latina/o youth used space and how they built community. The main hangout spots for them were the cafeteria, the benches outside of cafeteria, the library, and a small number of hallway locations. During school pride weeks, white youth typically decorated their lockers, while even the most engaged Latina/o youth, for the most part, did not participate in these rituals. The school has a college-going culture and white seniors will also decorate their lockers indicating their college choice. For Latina/o youth this was an irregular practice.

### **Conclusion**

I describe the varied communities Latina/o youth navigate and call home as they offer crucial contextual insights that factor into the performances Latina/o enact. As has been written about in this chapter, suburban communities across the country are experiencing varying levels of transformation in large part because of Latina/o settlement. We are an increasingly a suburban nation. Therefore, the importance of spotlighting issues in these settings is all the more pressing. To assume that where one lives does not play a role in how we choose to present ourselves

would be a mistake, to do so would render the performances of Latina/o youth being conducted in a vacuum. But as will be detailed later, the identities of Latina/o youth and their efforts to build community at SHS are fluid, contested, and informed in large part because of where they grew up.

### Chapter 3: “What is it that you’re looking for again?” Charting and Complicating the Theoretical and Methodological Landscape

“The ability of writers is to imagine what is not the self, to familiarize the strange and to mystify the familiar, is the test of their power.”

Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*

“We have a visitor today; do you want to tell us a little bit about what you’re doing?”

“Just let me know if you need anything from me.”

“Feel free to walk around and talk to students.”

“What is it that you’re looking for again?”

“Hi everyone, my name is ...”

While the focus of my dissertation is centered on youth, the adults at SHS were vital in facilitating my interactions with student participants, pointing me in important directions, including me in class conversations, and providing me access to their teaching materials. The question I was posed early on from staff, “What is it that you’re looking for again?” proved to be an important methodological question. Despite having advanced to the candidacy stage in my program, I was not entirely sure of how I wanted to collect data. Whenever staff would ask me what I was looking for, I was not sure what to tell them; I wanted things to come to me “organically.” In actuality, it entailed a delicate and difficult process of entering spaces, cultivating relationships, asking questions, being present, and most of all it demanded vulnerability. Like Morrison, although not as eloquently stated, I wanted to make the weird normal and the normal weird. From the get-go, I wanted to complicate ideas about suburban schooling, how Latina/o youth make sense of their identities within and across identity lines. To do so, required me take on Morrison’s challenge of taking for-granted ideas about ourselves and the worlds we navigate and turn them upside them. Everyday life is a messy enterprise and the

approach to capture and analyze it should be detailed in transparency, allowing us to privilege subaltern ways of life in order begin dismantling hegemonic power structures.

In this chapter I discuss why I relied on performance and performativity to analyze the identities of Latina/o youth at SHS. Further, in detailing my methodology, I try to do more than write a, “lifeless recounting of the procedures that were anything but lifeless” (Paris, 2008). Like Paris (2008) my research interests and questions are not framed by operationalizing variables; rather, they are formulated to investigate topics in all their complexity, in context (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 2). I devote time toward highlighting the messiness of qualitative research by complicating the research process (e.g. site selection, participant observation). Finally, this chapter also discusses how I analyzed my data. My work ultimately works toward, “[...] humanizing approaches that involve the building of relationships of care and dignity and dialogical consciousness raising for both researchers and participants” (Paris & Winn, 2014, p. xvi). This dissertation is also invested in disruptive qualitative inquiry (Brown, Carducci, & Kuby, 2014) with hopes of helping be part of engaging in transformative approaches.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In reading Julie Bettie’s (2014) *Women Without Class*, I knew I had found what I was looking for. Prior to this juncture, I had been thinking about and searching for an appropriate framework by which to understand the identities of Latina/o youth in suburban schools. On some level, I was also in search of answers to what I had experienced in high school. In having to navigate predominately white classrooms, of feeling unworthy in those spaces, of not feeling truly connected within my own ethno-racial cohort at school. What were the things I muffled? What were things I played up to fit in, to survive and excel academically and socially? These questions permeated my dissertation informing how I conceptualized it and how I collected data

in the field. Upon reading Bettie (2014) I found a framework that allowed me to highlight how social structures (e.g., race, class, gender) inform enactments of identity, along with how people use their agency to respond, re-write, and push back on these structures. Ultimately, Bettie's use of Butler's (1990) seminal work on performativity would prove to be a guiding foundation in my work.

To better understand the complexities of suburban Latina/o youth culture it is important to understand how identity is both fixed and fluid. Identities are outcomes of "social practice and social interaction" (Bucholtz, 2011, p. 1) or what Butler (1990) calls "stylized repetition of acts" (p. 179). Student participants negotiated and dealt with identity categories they inhabit, meaning they are not strictly passive with the identities that have been assigned to them. The student participants of my dissertation as Butler (1990) and Bucholtz (2011) would argue do not have unconstrained agency to construct their desired identities in a way that others will recognize and acknowledge. As Bucholtz (2011) argues, "The relationality of identity means that identities are not the projects of individuals alone but are constantly co-constructed, supported, negotiated, and challenged by others" (p. 236). Mediating these interactions are social structures (e.g. white supremacy, heteronormativity) that regulate the construction and presentation of self (Butler, 1990, p. 4). Yet, as Bettie (2014) notes when writing about the performance and performative nature of class that to some it may sound "too flimsy or voluntaristic" or overly deterministic (p. 54). Bettie argues like Ortner (1996) that we need new ways of talking about agency and structure in relationship to performance and performativity, Ortner calls for "structurally embedded agency" and "intention filled structures" (p. 12). In viewing agency and its relationship to structures as intertwined we are able to as Ortner (1996) writes, "[...] to recognize

the ways in which the subject is part of larger social and cultural webs, and in which social and cultural ‘systems’ are predicated upon human desires and projects” (p. 12).

In their interactions with their peers, Latina/o youth will enact different performances. At times students may be rebuffed by their white or Latina/o classmates for the performances they enact, meaning that they may not be allowed to sit by them or excluded in conversation during group work (Foley, 2010; Maira, 2002; Mendoza-Denton, 2008). Bucholtz (2011) states, “People who act outside their expected or assigned category may be seen as failed members of that category, as ‘wannabes’ of some other category” (p. 236). The performances that Latina/o students enact may also come at a cost (Agius Vallejo, 2012; Roth, 2015,) or what Flores-González (2002) calls, “role strain.” For example, *Lisette* spoke about the burden of being the sole Latina in her AP Language and Composition class her junior year and feared speaking up in class for fear of saying the wrong thing. As a senior in her English elective called Immigrant Perspectives she felt more comfortable because as she put it, “I’m with my people.” Lisette’s contrasting experiences speak to the performative element of identity and how space and people informed her presentation of self. Further, in writing about working and middle class white and Mexican American girls, Bettie (2014) writes, “Girls [...] had to negotiate their ‘inherited’ identity from home with their ‘chosen’ public identity at school” (p. 50). The fact that the girls in Bettie’s book acted differently at school and home speaks to the decisions they made about how they wanted to be seen and understood. The ways in which Latina/o navigate and challenge whiteness at SHS is vital, but it is equally important how Latina/o youth also perform their identities amongst themselves. In using a performative framework, I examine how student identities inform different performances at predominately white SHS. This study also seeks to study different identities (race, class, gender, and language) in relation to one another.

A performative framework may be viewed as one that lends too much agency to the subject, where a person can freely choose their performance, without considering the social structures and context informing the act (Bettie, 2014; Butler, 1990; Pennycook, 2003; 2009). Like Bettie (2014), I maintain it is important to study identity by situating it in its proper context. Therefore, my dissertation research examines both agency and the social structures at SHS to understand how Latina/o youth performances are enacted and change in different spaces.

### **Research Methodology**

I employed a critical ethnographic approach, grounded on the emic principle (Pike, 1964) of learning from youth's perspectives by shadowing (Rios, 2011) and hanging out (Bettie, 2014) with them by putting myself as close to their experiences as possible to see their world through their eyes. This methodology entailed participant observation, interviews, and artifact collection (e.g., school flyers, student work).

### **Making Contact with Shields High School**

Located in Lakeview, SHS also serves the communities of Northwood and Fort Holabird. In searching for a high school to conduct my field work, the driving force was identifying a community and school with a majority white population with a "sizeable" Latina/o population. I wanted to find a school with majority white students and where Latina/o students were the minority, but the second largest bloc of students. I used U.S. Census data to look for communities that fit the bill. I also relied on my own knowledge of the general demographic break down of different suburbs in the Chicagoland area and then would access the Illinois School Report Card website to look up schools in communities that I was curious about. It was important for me to also identify a school with a good standing, because I wanted to see how Latina/o students experience that sort of setting. During this process, I had compiled a short list



of schools mainly from the northern and western suburbs based on census data, school data published in Illinois School Report Card, along with looking at newspaper articles online about any sort of news or initiatives the school had undertaken, particularly if they involved Latina/o students. SHS was on this list and I then remembered that I had three contacts who were alum from the school and decided to speak to them. Two of the contacts, who were white, spoke very highly of the school and spoke about how Latina/o students segregated themselves. In hearing their commentary, I decided to explore further. I would come to find that the school a few years before my arrival decided not to send their female varsity basketball team to compete in a tournament in Arizona in protest over the state's strict anti-immigration legislation. Further, I had read about the school's annual Latino College Bowl competition hosted by SHS. The final piece of the puzzle was reaching out to a Latina alum from my university. In speaking with her, she talked in detail about her SHS pride, but also about the struggles that Latina/o students go through. I decided to end my search and make contact. One of the white alums was gracious enough to put me in contact with the district's then superintendent who put me in contact with the district's assistant superintendent for curriculum. After submitting a brief research proposal, I was given the green light from the district. I was pleasantly surprised that upon receiving permission to pursue my fieldwork, I was given no restrictions and no concerns were raised. I opted not to question the parameters of what the "green light" meant and proceed with my research foci.

### **Shields High School: Its Students and Participant Selection**

SHS reflects the demographic landscape in the community. During the first year of the project, SHS had 2,059 students and throughout the project academic and demographic data remained similarly proportioned. Of its teachers, 86% were white, with 1.9% Black, 3.8%

Latina/o, and 2.7% Asian. 71% of the students at SHS were white and 22% were Latina/o.<sup>25</sup> 4.5% of the student body was composed of English language learners. The school had a 94% four-year graduation rate, higher than the 85% state average. 86% of Latina/o students graduate, higher than the 80% rate at the state level. 41% of SHS Latina/o students met and or exceeded state standards in math, as did 40% in reading and 36% in science. These figures were lower than that of their white peers. In this affluent community, the district spent \$13,312 per student on instruction, well above the state average of \$7,419. With an average class size of 17 students, SHS offered its students a wide range of courses, including 22 Advanced Placement (AP), 25 electives, 32 fine and applied arts courses, and eight world language courses. Its students also had the option of participating in 54 clubs and sports ranging from football to lacrosse. Additionally, the school gets nationwide and statewide accolades for its academic successes, often ranking high on educational rankings of the best high schools. Many of its students have been National Merit Scholars and its alum have gone on to national acclaim in the arts, sports, and politics. These statistics represent flawed measures of success, in that they reify Eurocentric merit-centered ways of learning and success. Nonetheless I include this information to provide a sense of the public data that account for the school's good standing in the community.

The Latina/o student community at SHS is not monolithic. I purposefully recruited (Krathwohl, 1998) 19 participants (10 female and 9 male) students from varied identity points (race, class, gender, legal status, and language). The youth that are part of the study were chosen because I thought they would garner diverse and invaluable insights to the research questions of my dissertation. It is worth pointing out that the recruitment process is as Paris (2008) posits a

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<sup>25</sup> Demographic figures from SHS are from the Illinois State Board of Education's latest data (2014-2015)

“dialogic process.” As Paris (2008) writes, “[...] participants choose to work with researchers in addition to being chosen by researchers” (p. 15). Of the 19 participants, 15 are Mexican, two are Honduran, one is Guatemalan, and one is biracial (Italian & Mexican). Additionally, 13 participants were born in the U.S., two are permanent residents and four are undocumented. Students’ families belong to a socio-economic spectrum ranging from working class to upper-middle class, and all disclosed varying comfort levels with communicating in Spanish. Furthermore, student participants range from freshman through seniors who are on different educational tracks (e.g. survey, honors, AP), have varied extracurricular activity involvement (e.g. athletics, clubs) and belong to different social cliques. School staff facilitated my early classroom observations and interactions with some students (September & October 2014) and provided me class recommendations. These early interactions and observations allowed me to see students in their school environment and helped me construct a list of prospective participants who became key informants.

### **Participant Profiles**

**Xóchitl.** She came onto the scene with a burst of energy, a warm smile, and spunk which she displayed with her friends regularly. I met her in a freshman survey math course. She was not on my radar as a potential participant, but I came to her class after Mr. Velasquez, my main gatekeeper in the building, suggested that I would find the class interesting. After a couple of class observations, Xóchitl began to wave and say hello to me and slowly began asking why I was in the room, wondering if I was a student teacher. I took advantage of a student who was talking to me and whose bubbly personality I wanted to get to know. Many of the freshmen I was initially interested in having be part of the study were too shy and logistically I decided to still get to know them but opted to have Xóchitl be the sole freshman participant.

During the time of the study, Xóchitl was involved school activities and was doing well academically in her classes. She tried to participate in class and was involved in extracurricular activities. She was on the school's freshmen girls volleyball team. While not continuing with the sport as a sophomore, she opted for soccer instead. She was also member of Latinos Unidos and was selected to be on the junior varsity squad for the Latino College Bowl during her freshman year. Socially, Xóchitl hung out mostly with Latina/o students in the building.

Xóchitl, lives in Northwood and was born in Mexico and came from a working-class background with parents who immigrated to the U.S. from Guerrero. Her dad is a local cook at a barbeque restaurant and her mom is a stay at home mom. When she is not at school she talked about enjoying being on Twitter, watching TV, and eating and talked about having to babysit and wash dishes when at home. She is the youngest in the family with three older sisters and two half-siblings (brother & sister). Xóchitl is a native Spanish speaker, and speaks the language at home, but is more comfortable engaging in English.

**Victor.** He was a student who I met during his sophomore year. With a quiet disposition, he easily can light up a room with his bright white smile, leading to Ms. Borges one of his Spanish teachers to affectionately call him Colgate. He was a fashionable student who dressed well and kept up with fashion trends. I met him in his double period survey level English class; he displayed an interest in school but was not involved in school activities.

He was born in the U.S., but his parents came to the U.S. from Mexico. His father is from Morelia and his mother from Mexico City. His father started and owns a landscaping company and his mother works in the company managing the finances. His family's entrepreneurship has provided him and his family an upper-middle class lifestyle. He and his family often traveled to Mexico for significant blocks of time. He is fluent in both English and Spanish and is

comfortable engaging in both languages. Given his class status, he lives in a predominately white middle-class section of northern Lakeview. During the summer months, he earns some money by working at his father's landscaping company. His group of friends includes some white male students, but his closest friends are Latino male students. Upon graduating he attended a large 4-year public university in the Midwest.

**Sofia.** I first met Sofia after Mr. Velasquez asked her and a friend to take me on a tour of SHS. I quickly understood why he wanted me to meet her. Despite being short in stature, she possessed a high-level of energy that could not be ignored. Sofia was a sophomore and junior during my time at SHS and was a highly involved in school activities. She was a member of Latinos Unidos and a member of the varsity team of the Latino College Bowl. A strong leader committed to service, Sofia was a student mentor in the Future Saxons program, a member of Saxon Crew, a participant of various National Hispanic Institute programs. During her junior year, she was accepted in SOAR, a college access program.

Sofia comes from a working-class family. Her mother is originally from Oaxaca, but also lived in Mexico City, which is where Sofia grew up before coming to the U.S. Her mother works at a hotel, where she did house-keeping, but now has a supervisory role. Her step-father owns a landscaping business. She was born in Mexico and immigrated to the U.S. when she was eight years old. Her status as an undocumented student has given her an additional lens by which to approach her academic and social identity. She was involved in the school's DREAMERS & Allies support group. Sofia lived in Northwood with her mother and step-father. She is fluent in both English and Spanish and is comfortable communicating in both languages. She has several close female friends that are Latina. Upon graduating, she attended a medium sized 4-year public university in the Midwest.

**Esther.** She was someone I quickly became interested in as a participant. She was passionate about her Latina, Mexican identity. During the time of the study she was a sophomore and junior and was highly involved in school. She had been part of the school's softball and track and field teams but abandoned her athletic involvement during her junior year. She was an active member of Latinos Unidos and of Rotary. In addition to giving back to her community, Esther was passionate about mentoring and supporting her Latina/o community. She often would stay afterschool well into the night on Wednesdays to help babysit the children of Latina/o parents that came into SHS for workshops. She was a student mentor in the Future Saxons program. Academically, she did well in school and was part of the Greenberg Achievers Program.

Residing in Lakeview, Esther was born in the U.S. to parents born from Mexico from a working-class background. Her father worked a local restaurant and her mom did not work. Esther was a passionate ally to undocumented students and was a member of DREAMERS & Allies support group. Her commitment to social justice was unyielding and often spoke up about issues impacting the Latina/o community. Esther was fluent in both English and Spanish but voiced her preference in communicating in Spanish. While she had white friends, her closest friends were Latina/o students. Upon graduating, she attended a large 4-year private university in the Midwest.

**Bob the Builder.** Tall, funny, introspective, intelligent, and altruistic are some of the qualities that capture part of who Bob the Builder is. During the time of the study he was a junior and senior. He was a student who despite his brilliance often was not reflected in his formal academic performance. He was involved in school activities; he was member of the school's Chess Team and an active member of Latinos Unidos. Bob the Builder often would stay afterschool on Wednesday evenings to help babysit. He helped babysit the children of Latina/o

parents that came into SHS for workshops He received support as being a part of Project Puente and worked in different service sectors jobs during his senior year to help his family.

Born in the U.S. to Mexican immigrants from Guerrero, Bob the Builder was from a working-class family. His father worked in a chain coffee shop and his mother worked as a cashier at a fast-food restaurant. He is fluent in Spanish and English but feels more comfortable engaging in English. He lived in both Northwood and Lakeview during the time of the study and would mainly hang out with Latino students. Upon graduating he attended a public 4-year university in the Midwest.

**Hannah.** Hannah was someone I met after her cousin suggested I talk to her as someone who would provide me with insights into SHS. Upon meeting her, I knew she was a fit for my research. She was a junior and senior during my research. She was dedicated to her studies and involved in extracurricular activities. She was part of SOAR and dedicated to service. As a member of Rotary and Latinos Unidos she was an active member and committed to serving others. She was a varsity member of the Latino College Bowl team. She was also part of the school's Saxon Leaders program.

She lived in Lakeview with her mother. As a Mexican American whose family was from Guerrero, Mexico Hannah was very proud of her identity. Her mother worked in the community cleaning houses and came from a working-class family. She speaks both Spanish and English but is more comfortable in engaging in English. She was a student who had a mix of Latina/o and white friends, her closest friends were white female students. Upon graduating she attended a public 4-year university in the Midwest.

**Lisette.** Initially not on my radar, Lisette was someone I overheard talked about and kept coming up. I ultimately decided to meet her and knew why people spoke so highly of her.

With a warm, bubbly personality, she was also very introspective. During the time of the study, she was a junior and senior. She did well academically in school and received support through her membership in the Greenberg Achievers Program. She was active in extracurricular activities. She was part of Saxon Crew and Future Saxons program. She also was part of the varsity soccer team at school. Lissette lived in Northwood with her parents and three siblings. Having been born in Honduras, she migrated to the U.S. as a child. Being an undocumented student shaped her identity and experiences at SHS, but this part of her identity was something she downplayed. Coming from a working-class background, her father owned a painting company and her parents are devout in their Christian faith. She also spoke about knowing Spanish and English, but more comfortable using Spanish to communicate. Having a mix of white and Latina/o friends, Lissette was someone that did not have a core group of friends, instead navigated multiple groups. Upon graduating, Lissette attended a small four-year liberal arts school in the Midwest.

**Camilla.** Quiet, introspective, artistic, intellectual are some of the qualities that came to mind when thinking about Camilla. A junior and senior during the time of my study, Camilla did well academically in school; she was part of the Greenberg Achievers Program. She was also active with her membership in Rotary, a volunteer-based club, and a member of the junior varsity soccer team. She also was part of Future Saxons and served as the co-chair during her senior year. She also devoted her Saturdays volunteering for Little Dancers, one of the community programs the school ran for Latina/o families.

Having lived in Northwood, Camilla was born in the U.S. to Mexican parents who immigrated to the U.S. Her mother is from Puebla, while her father is from Guerrero. She came from a working-class background. Her mother worked at a near-by grocery store and her father



worked at a local country club. She had a mix of friends, but her closest friends were Latina female students. Upon graduating she attended a small four-year liberal arts school in the Midwest.

**Mia.** I first met Mia during her AP Art and Composition class. She was someone who was artistic, full of questions, with a genuine desire to get to know others. A junior and senior during the time of my study, Mia was not as actively involved in extracurricular activities. She was a participant of the National Hispanic Institute and worked outside of school to earn extra cash at a local ice cream shop.

Having been born in Michoacán, Mexico, her parents immigrated to the U.S. and first lived in Texas before settling in Northwood. Her father works for one of the local country clubs in the area and her mother does not work. Her father had become a citizen a few years back and was in the process of securing documentation for his family. Most of the friends Mia hung out with were Latina female students. While she communicates in both Spanish and English, she is more comfortable with English.

**Abigail.** Quiet, bright, compassionate, are some of the qualities that come to mind when attempting to describe Abigail. A junior and senior during the time of the study, Abigail did well in school. She was part of the SOAR program and was involved in extracurricular activities, like the junior varsity soccer team. She was also part of Saxon Crew and Future Saxons and had attended National Hispanic Institute events as well. In the past, she was also a member of the Race and Equity Club. In addition to her membership in SOAR, she received additional support through Project Puente and attended a Latina support group run out of the counseling department.

Hailing from San Luis Potosi, Abigail was undocumented for a large portion of her life but received documentation in middle school. Coming from a working-class background her parents both work - her mother at a local grocery store and her father in a local country club. Two of the participants in this study were also her cousins, Michelle and Jackie. Her native language is Spanish and is also fluent in English. She is more used to communicating in English. Most of her friends were Latina female students and upon graduating she attended a four-year liberal arts school in the Midwest.

**Jackie.** I first met Jackie in her Immigrant Perspectives class. A senior during the first year of my study, Jackie was a quiet student, but around her friends was social and jovial. Jackie did well academically and was part of the Greenberg Achievers program until her senior year. She was a mentor in the Future Saxons program and was also part of the junior varsity soccer team at school.

As a bi-racial student, Jackie's father was a Mexican immigrant and her mother was Italian American. Raised in a working-class family, Jackie also worked part-time at a local restaurant. Her closest friends were Latina students. She is fluent in both English and Spanish but is more comfortable engaging in English. Upon graduating, Jackie initially enrolled in a small liberal arts school in the Midwest. While remaining in the region, she transferred to a public four-year school.

**J. Cole.** I first met J. Cole in his Immigrant Perspectives class during his senior year. J. Cole was an intelligent, quiet, sarcastic, and calm person. He did well academically in school and was active in the school's orchestra and was also a member of the Greenberg Achievers Program. To earn extra money, J. Cole worked at a local pizzeria joint.

Born and raised in Lakeview to a working-class family, J. Cole's parents were immigrants from Mexico. His father was from Mexico City and his mother was from Michoacán. His father was a delivery driver and his mother worked in a beauty salon. His closest friends were white students, but he had friendly relationships with Latina/o students. Upon graduating he would attend a private four-year liberal arts school in the southern U.S.

**Richard.** A senior whom I met in his Immigrant Perspectives class. Richard was charismatic, intelligent, kind, ambitious, and philosophical. A strong academic student, Richard was a member of the Greenberg Achievers program. In the past, he had been part of the school's football team.

Having been raised in Northwood, his parents immigrated to the U.S. from Guatemala. His mother cleaned homes for a living and babysat and his father was a vending machine repairman. As a Guatemalan student, he often had to fend off jokes because of his ethnicity. He spoke both Spanish and English but felt more comfortable engaging in English. While he had some white friends, his closest friends were Latino students. Upon graduating he would attend a small liberal arts school on the east coast.

**MacDaddy.** Artistic, cool, athletic, inquisitive are some of the qualities that come to mind when describing MacDaddy. A senior during the first year of my study, MacDaddy was someone who jumped out and captured my attention. He possessed a fashionable disposition and was a leader in his group of friends. He was part SOAR, a college access program and was a member in Future Saxons. He was part of the varsity soccer team and participated in boxing and club soccer as well outside of school.

Having been born in the U.S. to Mexican immigrants, he was raised in Lakeview all his life. His father is from Guerrero and his mother is from Mexico City. His father was a manager at

a home remodeling store and his mother cleaned homes for a living. His closest friends were Latino male students, mainly from soccer. He communicates in Spanish and English and spoke about being comfortable engaging in both languages. Upon graduating he enrolled in a small liberal arts school in the Midwest but transferred to another school for a better opportunity to start on that school's soccer team.

**Jacobo.** Inquisitive, polite, intellectual, funny and kind were some of the qualities that capture Jacobo's personality. Having met him through Richard and Jay, Jacobo was a student who not part of any college access program but was active in Saxon Crew and Future Saxons. He was also a member of the school's varsity soccer team.

As an undocumented student from Honduras, his parents worked hard to provide a better life to him and his sisters. His father owned a painting company and his mother cleaned homes in the community. He spoke both English and Spanish but felt most comfortable speaking in Spanish. His closest friends were Latino male students, while friendly with those on the soccer team his closest friends came together because of their interest in religion. Upon graduating he initially enrolled in a community college in the Midwest, but then transferred to a small private school in the region.

**Jay.** Funny, creative, social, and inquisitive are some of the qualities that come to mind when describing Jay. I first met him during his Immigrant Perspectives Class. He was a member of Latinos Unidos and participated in the SHS's Homework Club. In the past, he was part of the school's football team. He was also interested in theater and often took acting classes.

Born in the U.S., he grew up in a working-class home to Mexican immigrants in Lakeview. He spoke both English and Spanish but felt most comfortable in English. While friendly with a lot of students, his closest friends were a mix of white and Latino male students.

Upon graduating, he initially attended a large four-year university in the Midwest, but then transferred to a local community college.

**Joaquín.** I first met him during his Immigrant Perspectives class during his senior year. He was a quiet person around strangers, but amongst his friends he was a ring leader at the ready with jokes and conversation. He was a bright, intelligent person interested in politics and business. He played soccer when he started at SHS, but an injury prevented him from continuing. In the past he volunteered for a Latina/o community organization in Northwood, mainly helping Latina/o children with their homework. He was part of Latinos Unidos and did academically well in school.

Having been born in the U.S. to immigrant parents from Mexico, he grew up in a working-class home. His father worked as a landscaper for a country club and his mother cleaned homes for a living. He had been raised in Northwood and spoke both English and Spanish. He felt comfortable in engaging in Spanish. His closest friends were Latino male students, particularly those that were part of the school's soccer team. Upon graduating, he attended a public four-year university in the Midwest.

**Liliana.** A senior when I first started my research, Liliana was a confident, savvy, ambitious, and dedicated student. She did academically well in school and was active in school activities. She was a member of the Greenberg Achievers program until she left her senior year. She was also active in SHS's student council and Rotary club.

Having been born in the U.S., to a Mexican mother from Tamaulipas and a Guatemalan father, she was born in Chicago and moved to the area later in her childhood. Her mother worked as a hair salon in Chicago. She communicated in both English and Spanish but felt most comfortable in English. Her circle of friends varied, she had a mix of white and Latina/o

students, during the school day she typically hung out with white students, but outside of school hung out with both Latina/o and white students. Upon graduating she would attend a large four-year public university in the Midwest.

**Michelle.** A senior during the time of my study, she was a passionate, intelligent, kind, and social person. Having met her in her AP Spanish Literature class, she was someone who was passionate about social justice issues and proud feminist. She did well academically in school and was active in school activities. She was a member of the Greenberg Achievers Program, was a mentor in the Future Saxons program and was a member of Rotary Club. To earn extra cash, she worked part-time at a local restaurant as a cashier.

Born in the U.S. to Mexican immigrant parents from San Luis Potosi, Michelle lived in Northwood. She came from a working-class background. She communicated in both English and Spanish but felt most comfortable engaging in English. Michelle hung out with white and Latina/o students. Upon graduating she would attend a prestigious liberal arts school on the East coast.

### **Doing “Critical” Ethnographic Research**

Originally developed in anthropology to describe the ways people live their lives in cultural groups over an extended time period (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Gordon, Holland, & Lahelma, 2001; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1993; Hatch, 2002; Heath, 1982; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Mehan, 1982; Patel, 2016 Watson-Gegeo, 1988), ethnography has also been used in educational research to capture the dynamics of school and its actors. While definitions of ethnography vary, ethnography in education per Delamont and Atkinson (1995) is “research on and in educational institutions based on participant observation and/or permanent recordings of everyday life in naturally occurring settings” (as cited in Gordon, Holland, and Lahelma,

2001, p. 188). In building upon this definition, this type of research adheres to the naturalistic (Heath, 1982; Mehan, 1982) essence of qualitative research. As Mehan (1982) puts it, “[...] ethnography is vigorously naturalistic” (p. 61).

By embracing ethnography’s naturalist essence, it is important that researchers understand participants from their point of view. The emic-etic principle of analysis (Pike, 1964) is essential in conducting ethnographic research. “Emic calls attention to differences important within a particular community [...]” (Wolcott, 2008, p. 142). As defined above, emic refers to cultural based perspectives, interpretations, and categories used by research participants to conceptualize and encode knowledge and to guide their own behavior. An analysis built on emic concepts incorporates the participants’ perspectives and interpretation of behavior, events, and situations, and does so in the descriptive language they themselves use (Spradley, 1979; Watson-Gegeo, 1988). Language is more than a means of communicating reality; it is a tool for constructing our sense of reality (Spradley, 1979, p. 17). By incorporating and not dismissing the perspectives and language of the participants(s), ethnographic research can yield richer insights into how people make meaning and how we are influenced by others. Ethnographic work as Clifford (1986) puts it, allows us to understand partial truths, thus advancing the argument that ethnographers can never fully lay claim to someone else’s knowledge or experiences. As Watson-Gegeo (1988) points out, ethnographers do not come to the research project with a “blank-slate.” The role of the researcher is fundamentally important to the research process as well. Moreover, it is also important to recognize that in addition to the participants, the spaces they traverse are imbedded in social structures with histories of power. The recognition of power is a central feature that traditional ethnographic work does not fully consider. Clifford (1986) writes, “Ethnographic work has indeed been enmeshed in a world of enduring and changing

power inequalities, and it continues to be implicated. It enacts power relations. But its function within these relations is complex, often ambivalent, potentially counter-hegemonic” (p. 9). For this reason, this dissertation project will embody many of the traditions of ethnographic research but will do so by following a critical ethnographic lens.

Critical ethnographers have noted the importance of understanding participants in their historical, cultural, and social realities, but they depart from traditional ethnography given their commitment to create social change through research by uncovering inequalities and connecting them to broader structures of power and control (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000; Madison, 2012; Pfohl & Gordon, 1986; Thomas, 1993). In addition to critical ethnography’s investment in understanding dimensions of power and control, it is also interested in the reflective process and how that process is a value-laden (Thomas, 1993; Thomas & O’Maolchatha, 1989). Critical ethnographic works makes room for researchers to reflect on their practice and how social constructs inform their interactions with participants and analysis. As Patel notes, critical ethnography counters, “[...] objectivist-driven concepts, which has yielded more space for research designs to draw from and produce decidedly multi-perspectival stances” (p. 52-53). Arising from the postmodernist movement (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998; Thomas, 1993), critical ethnography departs further from traditional ethnographic work because of its political purpose (Thomas, 1993). In using a critical ethnographic approach, I complicated potential injustices within a particular lived domain and aimed to contribute to emancipatory knowledge and to the discourses on social justice (Carspecken, 1996; Madison, 2012; Thomas, 1993). Given critical ethnography’s commitment to social justice, researchers employing this methodology are interested in understanding “what is” in order to move toward “what could be”



(Carspecken, 1996; Denzin, 2001; Madison, 2012; Noblit, Flores, & Murillo, 2004; Thomas, 1993).

Now that the purpose of this methodology has been introduced, it is important to give some attention to the tools associated with ethnographic research. As Thomas (1993) points out critical ethnography, like traditional ethnography relies, on qualitative interpretation of data and it entails participant observation, interviewing, and artifact collection (Hatch, 2002).

Observations are ideal for documenting the social surroundings of participants as well as the everyday experiences and interactions that are too “normal” for a participant to articulate (Berg, 1989; Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, 2003; Glesne, 1999; Patton, 1990; Spradley, 1980). I collected 20 months of field data between August 2014 and June 2016. Prior to my formal start in August 2014, I spent some of May of the 2013-2014 school year “casing the joint” (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). This time was used to meet staff and students at SHS. I used this month to make a preliminary list of students to follow up with in August. I continued getting a lay of the land beginning in August until October. These additional months allowed me to slowly gain focus by acquainting myself with how SHS functioned, gaining a familiarity with the building, and most importantly building rapport with students. In these early months, observations were semi-structured in that I would shadow students based on suggestions by staff and what I saw. I followed up on students who jumped out (e.g. dress, speech, personality, engagement, etc.) by making a point to go to as many of their classes as possible. Mr. Velasquez, SHS’s English Language Learner chair and social studies teacher was instrumental in helping connect me with teachers and students. During my first year at SHS, I carried out observations during the school day five days a week and at some afterschool activities (e.g. club meetings, sporting events). During the second year, I observed two to three days of the week in addition to spending time

with students in their respective afterschool activities. I spent less time observing at SHS because of my teaching responsibilities on campus at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Through participant observation methods, I witnessed student conversations, relationships, and actions. Observational methods were a good vehicle to understand the process and context of students' identity and enactment of agency. In addition, observations gave me a firsthand reference point for the perspectives and experiences participants would come to share in interviews (Patton, 1990). It should be noted that at times I would play a more traditional role as an observer while at other times I was more active such as participating in class conversations, playing soccer, or going out to eat with participants.

I developed a rough schema to focus my observations (Berg, 1989; Patton, 1990). Since student perspectives are a central component of this study, I put myself where they hung out to experience things through students' eyes. For all observations that were conducted, I took descriptive and reflective fieldnotes. I took notes in the field and expanded on these upon returning to my home (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, 2003; Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011; Glesne, 1999). For example, in early memos I wrote about my anxieties approaching students I did not know and how to talk to them in non-intrusive ways. In my reflective notes, I also wrote about preliminary analysis and future data collection plans. I looked at students' schedules to maximize my observations; therefore, I did not focus on one student at a time. My descriptive fieldnotes included the setting, dialogue, activities, and interactions among participants at SHS (Berg, 1989; Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, 1998; Glesne, 1999; Patton, 1990). I also jotted down my research dilemmas, preliminary analysis, and future plans in separate files of reflective notes. By writing a "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) it allowed me to review, study, and think about what I was seeing in the field repeatedly, affording me the space to think critically and to contemplate on a

regular basis. Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2011) point out that, “[...] there is no one ‘natural’ or ‘correct’ way to write about what one observes. Rather, because descriptions involve issues of perception and interpretation, different descriptions of similar or even the same situations and events are both possible and valuable” (p. 6). My initial weeks of observation were spent on developing my knowledge of SHS and establishing rapport with students, a key element of the participant observation process (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). Taylor and Bogdan (1998) argue, “if researchers do not directly observe people in their everyday lives, they will be deprived of the context necessary to understand many of the perspectives in which they are interested” (p. 92). Thus, observing individuals within a context and listening to what they said provided me with a depth of understanding of the complexities that exist at SHS (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). My dissertation depended on observational data, but it was augmented with interviews that I conducted with student participants. These interviews allowed me to clarify and reinforce what I saw in the field, but also find new aspects to analyze.

Interviewing is a hallmark experience of fieldwork research (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). I interviewed 19 student participants for up to 90 minutes. Interviews were audio recorded and took place at SHS during school hours during the spring semester of 2015 after I had established a healthy rapport. Most of the interviews took place in a small room in SHS’s library. Through interviews, I captured student perspectives, thoughts, feelings, experiences, and sense of meaning (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). In using interviews in tandem with observations, I was able to:

[...] uncover the meaning structures that participants use to organize their experiences and make sense of their worlds. These meaning structures are often hidden from direct

observation and taken for granted by participants and qualitative interview techniques offer tools for bringing these meanings to the surface (Hatch, 2002, p. 91).

My questions focused on schooling, community, identity, and relationships with peers. With schooling and community, I asked participants to describe SHS and talk about where in the building they feel comfortable.

### **Community**

1. How long have you been living in your community?
2. Have you lived anywhere else? If so, where did you live before and for how long?
  - a. What led your family to move?
3. How would you describe your community?

### **School**

1. How would you describe your high school (e.g. academically, socially, etc.)?
2. How do you think white students would describe your high school?
3. Where do you hang out in school?

In talking about identity, I had students reflect on what their Latina/o identities meant to them along with discussing how those identities informed their academic and social lives.

1. How would you describe yourself?
2. Would you say that being \_\_\_\_\_ is important to you? If so, why?
3. Can you think of times in your life that being \_\_\_\_\_ has been more important or less important?
4. Are there times in school that you feel you are treated differently than others because of who you are? Please explain.
  - a. If so, how did that make you feel?
  - b. If not, to what do you attribute that?
5. Do you feel like you are supposed to act differently around different people (e.g. teachers, students, friends) in school? Why or why not?

6. Tell me about your fashion style.
  - a. What are the clothes people wear at school?
7. Tell me about the music you like to listen. What do you like?

Finally, with questions related to peers, I had them discuss the dynamics of their interactions with white and Latina/o peers.

1. Who do you hang out with in school?
2. How would you describe your friends?
  - a. What do you have in common?
  - b. What makes you different from your friends?
3. How long have you known your friends?
4. What kinds of things do you do together at school?
  - a. What kinds of things do you do together outside of school?

By interviewing my participants, I built upon observations by tailoring my questions to what I was observing in their school. My approach in asking questions was to facilitate conversation. Therefore, I avoided close-ended and highly structured questions. I used what Rubin & Rubin (1995) call semi-structured questions. When I conducted my interviews, I also asked follow-up questions that deviated from my interview protocol. During interviews, it was important for me to create a comfortable environment and to work toward a conversation interview. As Madison (2012) comments, “The interviewee is not an object, but a subject with agency, history, and his or her own idiosyncratic command of a story. Interviewer and interviewee are in partnership and dialogue as they construct memory, meaning, and experience together” (p. 28).

The final part of the ethnographic trifecta is the accumulation and analysis of school and student documents (e.g. artwork, essays). Using documents from SHS added new information and acted as a check on information derived from interview and observational data (Bogdan &

Biklen, 2003). For instance, collecting school flyers or watching school announcements allowed me to see which students and messages were being privileged and how this impacted Latina/o youth. To add to this rich understanding, students' work revealed their interests and aspirations, but also how they felt about their school environment. Their work allowed me to talk to them about what they liked and did not like about SHS. For example, classroom writing assignments often afforded them an opportunity to reflect on their identities, the push and pull feelings of whiteness, and that of their own ethno-racial community. For this study, I examined school documents (e.g. flyers, student newspapers, reports, and class handouts). The collected documents provided a more holistic picture of the school, its mission, and daily activities, during my study.

### **Data Analysis**

To make sense of my data, I coded it and categorized by themes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011; Madison, 2012). I first divided my data into broad categories of analysis that Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw (2011) call "open coding." Upon reading and coding my data I then refined through a more focused approach. For instance, much of my early codes were broad in scope. For example, whenever there was something that related to my research questions (identity, community/sense of belonging), I would categorize it as "white/Latina/o" or "Latina/o/Latina/o" or when it came to space, "Latina/o academic space." These were points of entry into more specific codes. These broad codes made me think more critically of what I meant for instance by "white/Latina/o" or "Latina/o academic space." Ultimately these broad categories led to more specific codes centered for instance on performing silence in academic settings and to interrogate myself about what community or safe spaces for Latina/o youth looked like. Once I developed the initial set of codes; I read through my

fieldnotes and codes once more to revise. While drawing from elements of grounded theory (see Charmaz & Mitchell; Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 2001) my approach is interpretive (Denzin, 1997; Dyson & Genishi, 2005; Erickson, 1986; Geertz, 1973). While grounded theory allows for the exploration of new areas of inquiry, its positivist origins (Charmaz & Mitchell, 2001) do not fully consider the fact that researchers are not empty slates, they bring much to their research site(s).

Through an interpretative approach, I adhere to the principles of critical ethnography. In particular the reflexive nature of interpretative work. As Dyson and Genishi (2005) write, “Researchers’ data gathering, analysis, and indeed, eventual write-up of others’ experiences are mediated by their own lives” (p. 81). My effort to understand the lives of Latina/o youth at SHS is informed by own identities and experiences. Moreover, the interpretative nature of critical ethnography allows for an analysis of data that allows for one that is rooted in understanding how phenomenon come to be and how to work to change them. In writing about qualitative research in teaching, Erickson (1986) writes:

Interpretative, participant observational fieldwork research, in addition to a central concern with mind and with subjective meaning, is concerned with the relation between meaning-perspectives of actors and the ecological circumstances of action in which they find themselves. This is to say that the notion of the social is central in fieldwork research (p. 127).

Erickson’s argument should make us reflect upon the importance of not just recounting what occurs in the lives of Latina/o youth but consider the micro and macro issues in their lives that impact their schooling.

### **Final Methodological Reflections**

I conclude this chapter by returning to positionality and reflexivity. Being aware of self and the power one brings to a research project must be discussed and analyzed (Coffey, 1999; Davies, 2008; Madison, 2012; Noblit et al., 2004; Thomas, 1993). Yet some scholars believe it is important for researchers to maintain a sense of strangeness or distance during the fieldwork process (see Delamont, 1992; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1993; Lofland & Lofland, 1995). Madison (2012) writes, “Positionality is vital because it forces us to acknowledge our own power, privilege, and biases just as we are denouncing the power structures that surround our subjects” (p. 8). Implicit in Madison’s writing is that research is and should be political. Fine (1994) in paraphrasing Rosaldo (1989) writes that, “[...] researchers who represent themselves as detached only camouflage their deepest, most privileged interests (p. 15). It is my hope that my reflectiveness in this chapter and in the opening chapter of this dissertation are read as an effort of transparency about my research process and to give the reader insights into my thought process. Further, as Pillow (2003) writes in citing Patai (1994), “[...] ‘we do not escape from the consequences of our positions by talking about them endlessly’” (p. 188). My reflective fieldnotes afforded me the space to not only to think about how I was interacting with students, but it allowed me the opportunity when necessary to reflect upon my own experiences as a Latino young person growing up in suburbia. As Davies (2008) notes reflexivity affects all aspects of the research process. Meaning that for me the process was not just a check mark, but part of my methodological approach that shaped how I collected and analyzed data. It empowered me shift gears and explore new areas of inquiry. Reflexivity about my positionality as a researcher hopefully gave you insights into the delicate, relational work that goes into



forging meaningful relationships with participants and how our subjectivities as researchers (Delgado Bernal, 1998) factor into the messy, tension-filled enterprise of qualitative research.

## Chapter 4 Performing Silence: Understanding Silence on a Continuum

“Ahí me voy a quedar bien calladito.”<sup>26</sup>

*Joaquín*, senior

One of the aspects of my fieldwork that became quickly evident was how audibly quiet Latina/o were in their classes. The fact that Latina/o youth at Shields were quiet in their classrooms was not necessarily earth shattering, it was a commonly known fact by their teachers who were also in search of answers as to why this was the case. This chapter attempts to bring some nuance to the varied types of silences Latina/o youth enacted. Their performances varied depending on who they were interacting with, the space, class, etc. Their enactments of silence fall onto a continuum that on one end shows how Latina/o youth are silenced and on the other highlights their agency and examines their silence as an act of resistance. This chapter also argues that the silence youth enact while varied, does not stem from Latina/o students being uninterested in their education. Their silence is a result of the context that they are in, largely influenced by the whiteness of Shields High School.

Accordingly, rather than seeing silence as a de-investment from school, we should see it as a savvy, strategic, and political act on the part of Latina/o students to survive. As will be discussed in greater detail, students like *Joaquín* sometimes would rather remain quiet, not in submission but in resistance.

As I delved deeper into my fieldwork, I asked myself why Latina/o students were not verbally participating in their classes, what were the factors informing their varied embodiments of silence? Through observations and talking with student participants I realized how

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<sup>26</sup> Translation, “I’m going to sit there and be really quiet.”

complicated their silences were and how much of that were informed by the whiteness of SHS and the actions white youth engaged in.

**¡No pues wow! Whiteness as a Sinvergüenza<sup>27</sup>**

Enactments of whiteness come in different forms in and out of the classroom. White youth at SHS are all not the same, they possess varied identities that speak to the diversity within the white student body. Like other schools where white youth are the majority, hierarchies exist that demarcate who hangs out with who and who is allowed to use different spaces. Yet, even for white youth that were not marginalized, they still benefited from being white. Even white youth who were friendly to Latina/o youth, still inflicted painful experiences on Latina/o youth regardless of their intent. This section demonstrates how whiteness manifested itself at SHS. Further, I also examine the impact these enactments have on Latina/o students. These moments inform how and why Latina/o students perform their academic and social identities at SHS. Moreover, by referring to whiteness as a sinvergüenza, I spotlight it to demonstrate how all consuming, shameless, and dehumanizing it can be, thus demonstrating the power it possesses.

**White Youth Messing Around**

**AP Environmental Science (APES).** Students in AP Environmental Science began to trickle into their classroom. As they walked to their usual desks, Mrs. Beatty told them she had assigned new seats. White students began to playfully complain by asking why they had to comply, they were objecting to each of Mrs. Beatty's arguments every chance they got. Eventually the white students yielded. Mrs. Beatty started class by reviewing the agenda for the week. As she was talking, a white female student named Alexia came in late and smiled mischievously to her white friends in the class. Alexia proceeded to walk to her usual desk, but

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<sup>27</sup> Translation: Well, wow! Whiteness as a Scoundrel

Mrs. Beatty told her to sit in her new desk. There was a back-and-forth conversation, leading to white students chiming in alongside Alexia as to why they had to change seats. The three Latina/o students (*Michelle, Richard, and J. Cole*) in the class, all of whom were participants did not engage in support of Alexia. Mrs. Beatty regained control once more and began to walk around the classroom to check in with each student to see if they had completed their homework assignment. Once more, some of the white students complained, this time they asked why they could not use their laptops to complete the assignment and Mrs. Beatty told them because she did not want them to get creative with font sizes. *Michelle, Richard, and J. Cole* worked individually and quietly. Once Mrs. Beatty completed the homework check, she had students get into small groups to work on a lab in the back of the room. As students transitioned Alexia began to laugh loudly as she stuck her hand in the class fish tank in an attempt to grab a fish. Mrs. Beatty raised her voice and asked her if she wanted a referral to the dean's office. A few moments later, Alexia walked over to a sink to wash her hands and when she turned the water on, she put it on blast, causing the counter top to get wet which prompted her and her friends to loudly. Mrs. Beatty again asked her if she wanted to go to the dean's office. This interplay, prompted *Richard* who by then was seated at one of the lab tables to look in my direction. He raised his left hand in the air with a look of disgust and shook his head.

I could not help but sympathize with *Richard's* reaction. I decided to ask him along with *Michelle* and *J. Cole* on their thoughts about their white classmates in the class.

**Gabriel:** I noticed that there's a lot of talking with the white kids, so for example its Mara and Alexia that do a lot of the talking, how does that make you feel to be a student in the class?"

**Richard:** Sometimes what she (Alexia) does say is funny (chuckles) but other times it's just like, like one time she got up and started making noises and talking to Mara and Mrs. Beatty got mad and under her breath Alexia would mumble all this kind of stuff so even though she's funny she takes things too far and then Mrs. Beatty continuously

attacks her and then Alexia attacks back which makes it frustrating to learn because we had to waste ten minutes because they were fighting. While I'm sitting there, I'm like shut up.

**Gabriel:** What do you think would happen if you or *J. Cole* or *Michelle* acted the same way as they did?

**Richard:** That'd be weird. Like if we were? I never thought about it like that. I don't know. I don't know how she would react. I honestly don't feel like she'd be, like remember how she dealt with it most of the year? I think we'd be shut down a lot faster. Do I see me, *J. Cole*, or *Michelle* doing that? I don't think so.

*Michelle* was also frustrated. She spoke about Alexia and the class by remarking, "It just makes me so mad, she's the teacher and you can do so much to stop that, and she doesn't do anything. I mean I love her, she's so nice and she's really helpful to me, *Richard*, and *J. Cole* who are Latino students, she likes us a lot, but you have to do something." A few moments later *Michelle* would continue her commentary by saying:

It's just rude to the teacher, not even to me, cuz like whatever. She's actually trying to help you and it's so unfair, Alexia and Mara they have schools that have accepted them. These are really good schools. Alexia cheats on every single test and teachers know that like Mrs. Beatty knows that and she doesn't say anything and like then she complains about having such a bad grade in the class, but she has a B in the class. Mrs. Beatty has told her if you're going to fail, fail quietly like don't bring everyone in it, but she doesn't get it and she's not even failing.

Finally, I asked *J. Cole* about his impressions of Mrs. Beatty's class. In referring to the students, he said, "I just find them annoying. Like I never really thought of it as those white kids, I thought of it as those kids are so annoying they just need to stop."

Overall, *Richard*, *Michelle*, and *J. Cole* voiced frustration. *Richard* and *Michelle* voiced the strongest repudiation of some of the white students in the class. In their commentary, each was aware of what white students in this class do and can get away with, as *Michelle* opined that Alexia got away with cheating. While there were moments in the class session described above were *J. Cole*, *Richard*, and *Michelle* laughed at some of the comments and questions their white

classmates posed, they did not initiate any actions that were disruptive or challenged their teacher's authority. Yet, I was left to wonder what the response would be if *Michelle*, *Richard*, or *J. Cole* initiated some of the things Alexia engaged in? What response would have been given by students, what response would Mrs. Beatty give? While I do not think Mrs. Beatty would have sent them to the dean's office, *Richard* felt that any similar actions on their part would have been to use his words "shut down faster." Which begs the question what amount of space and latitude is given to Latina/o students to enact their identities, ideas, jokes, critiques without experiencing repercussion? This was not a one-time occurrence in this class or in others. In *Lisette's* pre-calculus class I saw the same approach on the part of white students.

**Pre-Calculus.** Students were socializing with one another before class started. Mr. Percival jotted problems for students to work on and upon the bell ringing, Mr. Percival asked students to take a seat. Within a few moments of his lesson, quiet, scattered conversations began on the part of white students. Mr. Percival continued teaching, but then the number and volume of conversations reached a crescendo leading him to tell his students, "Hey! Take your stuff out. They'll be a chance to talk." *Lisette* was one of three Latina/o students in a predominately white class. During this initial exchange, *Lisette* took down notes and did so throughout the period.

Minutes passed, and Mr. Percival continued with his lesson plan, allowing time for students to solve problems and to check their answers with people around them. Yet, not all the white students were on task, some kept asking their teacher about his spring break. Mr. Percival attempted to move on to the next stage in his lesson and once more the conversations took over the room, leading him to remark, "Every time we do this it just slows you down." *Lisette* chuckled in seeing her teacher check his students. The white students that were chatting at this point understood that they had gotten to their teacher; they stopped talking and remained quiet

for the remainder of the period. In speaking with *Lisette* about the students in her class, she noted that Mr. Percival always had to tell quiet down the class. Like many of Mrs. Beatty's white students, those in Mr. Percival belonged to popular white social cliques. These students, often went unchecked and had larger latitude to do what they wanted. *Lisette*, like her Latina/o peers in the science class would laugh at times at their jokes but was also bothered by the distractions. Beyond impacting their ability to focus and having to deal with white students having more latitude to push the boundaries of attentiveness in the classroom, some white students also silenced and frustrated Latina/o students because of their ignorance on political issues.

### **They Said What?! White Youth and Politics**

**American Perspectives.** In American Perspectives, a cross-listed class co-taught with one teacher from English and another from social studies, students were expected to demonstrate command of the topics discussed during the school year by applying it in their research projects. One of the key components of the course was to incorporate and honor the perspectives, contributions of people of color and other marginalized people in American history. Throughout the year, Mr. Steinbeck and Mr. Schama talked about race and racism in the U.S. and I was interested to see what students would talk about in their final projects. I came during the middle of *Abigail's* group presentation on LGBTQ rights. The group was finishing their discussion on the need for SHS to adopt a mandated course for students to take to increase their awareness in hopes of becoming allies in the building. A short question and answer session followed. Students applauded, and the second group composed of all white students stood and headed to the front of the classroom.

This second group presented their project, which was making a case for promoting interracial communities. The group quickly got to their main point, they advocated for the

elimination of government programs to help minorities. On one of their PowerPoint Slides, it read, “Our group believes that the best method to help reduce the disparity of wealth among races is to eliminate all government funding given to minorities, gradually and with appropriate warning.” During their presentation, the collective faces in the class began to morph into a collection of faces ranging from confusion to disbelief. The general tone that I observed when *Abigail* and *Hannah* looked at me was, “Are they actually saying this?” “Oh, hell no, they just didn’t say that!”

This group continued by contending that by eliminating government programs, which they maintained had never been effective, had caused the waste of millions of dollars. At one point, one of the white male students made a comment about, “these people,” which caused some of the students to respond by adjusting their posture and gesturing confusion on their faces. The group ended their presentation and hands immediately jotted upward into the air. I was not sure what role I would play, I opted to hold back to see what their teachers would do. Colin, a white male student raised his hand and asked for clarification, he asked the group if they were saying Black people were lazy which prompted the members of the group to stand in silence, to mumble, and to articulate an incoherent response. Others asked the group about how their policy would be implemented, *Abigail* and *Hannah* listened to the questions and responses, occasionally making eye-contact with me. Sensing a decline in questions Mr. Steinbeck and Mr. Schama pressed for more details. Mr. Schama pushed back and asked for clarification on the terms “lazy” and “hard working” with the hopes they would realize what they were saying was racist and wrong. At one-point Mr. Steinbeck asked what sources informed their arguments, particularly since they did not cite any. The group once more could not articulate a response and when pressed, one male white student said his dad was the one who shared that piece of information.



This class incident presented a more nuanced portrait of white students. You had white students take the lead and pushback by critiquing the group, taking the burden of *Hannah*, *Abigail*, and the few other students of color in the class. I chose this portion of my field notes because the white student population is not a monolith. This moment was one in which you saw some white students pushing back, holding their white peers accountable. Yet, this moment also demonstrated the difficult, murky waters of attempting to do social justice work in the classroom. Despite what they had learned all year, this group still espoused racist commentary. Clearly, this work is not linear. Just because you read an article by Ta-Nehisi Coates, talk about the Chicana/o civil rights movement, or the failure of American reconstruction after the civil war is no guarantee of buy in from students. It is further evidence, as will be discussed in greater length in the conclusion that the responsibility should not rest solely on educators to combat inequality. But, while coalitions of solidarity are formed, educators still play an immense role in pushing back as do their students. The stakes are high because this incident was one of many examples of seemingly mundane experiences that accumulate to exhausting, oppressive moments for Latina/o youth of this study. This contextual sectioned presents a small number of vignettes that highlight the ways white students enacted their identities, beliefs and their impact on Latina/o students.

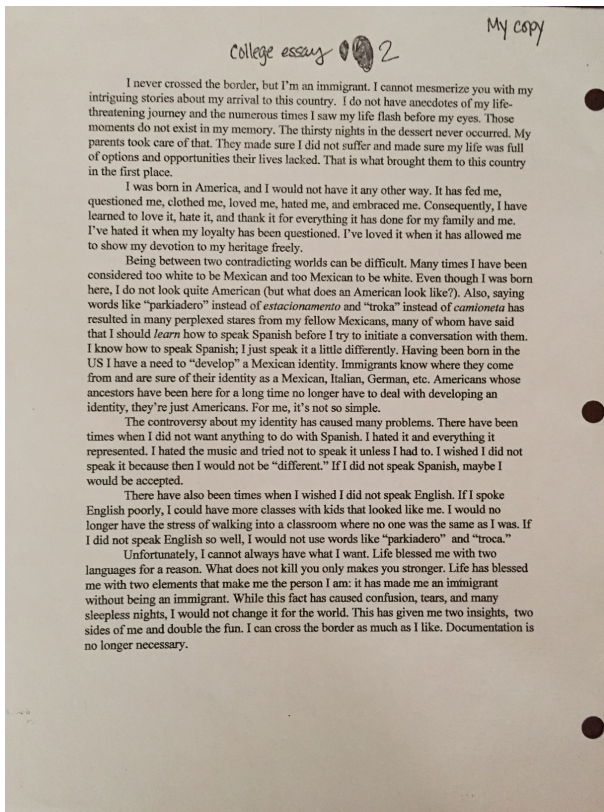
Early on in my fieldwork, I had an opportunity to join and participate in a small group discussion in a senior English elective class, Immigrant Perspectives. At the start of class, Ms. Cuomo asked her students to place their desks in the classroom into a circle. Students began moving around desks and taking their seats. As students took their seats, they went into their usual groups, sitting with their friends, separating themselves along gendered and racial lines. *Richard*, *Jackie*, and *J. Cole* sat by one another along with the rest of the Latino males in the course.

After welcoming the class and explaining the agenda for the period, Ms. Cuomo proceeded to count off students to assign groups. I was included in this process and was placed in a group with white students. I went with the flow to gain a contextual glimpse at white students, while also observing Latina/o students from afar. I sometimes would do this early on to get a different take on Latina/o students.

Ms. Cuomo had the class read a personal statement from a student she had several years back. She informed the class that this personal statement was successful in getting the student into college. She left things vague, because she wanted to talk more about it after students had a chance to read, evaluate, and process it. Further, this activity was part of Ms. Cuomo's unit on borderland contradictions and she wanted students to use that as a theme for completing their personal statements for college applications.

In my group, the two white males and the one white female student critiqued the essay shortly after reading it. Ethan was the most vocal member of the group and took an active role in leading the conversation. He argued that if he were grading the essay that he would give it a D+. I jumped in and said I would give it a different grade, I said that while it was definitely not perfect, there were good ideas in it.

**Figure 7: Class Handout of College Essay**



Ethan continued by focusing on what he thought the essay lacked; structure, transitions, and focus. He argued that the message of the essay was all over the place. After going back and forth for a few more minutes, Ms. Cuomo asked other students to offer comments as to what their respective groups discussed. Similarly, some more white students voiced similar concerns that Ethan raised, albeit not to the degree which Ethan voiced in the group discussion. Latina/o students did not participate verbally during this portion of the class discussion.

When Ms. Cuomo prompted the class as to what grade they would give the essay, Ethan chimed in and said that it deserves a D+. In the end, Ms. Cuomo said that when she graded the personal statement in the years prior to this activity, she gave it an A and gave her reasons. While she spoke, Ethan proceeded to say, "If this essay is an A, then I'm going to get an A in this class."

In reflecting later in the day, I was angry. I thought to myself who the heck does he think he is? It was difficult listening to Ethan because I could envision Latina/os students feeling silenced because of the tone that Ethan took, a tone of authority. In talking with him, I felt like we were not having a conversation, it was more like he was talking at me. I began to think about how often Latina/o students experienced similar things. What was more revealing was that this essay was written by a former SHS Latina student who had later been accepted to a well-ranked law program. Her essay spoke of the complexities and contradictions of being a Latina student at Shields and feeling like she did not fit in. Yet the non-linear approach to this essay, highlighting the fluidity and hybridity of identity was taken as unstructured and unworthy of a good grade. Ethan would continue to reiterate the point that that's not how you write, as if there was one gold standard to writing a successful narrative. In my view, Ethan, was saw himself as the torchbearer of meritocracy. Whatever he envisioned as a successful college personal statement was the right way and that anything else, particularly if it was like the essay students read was not rigorous and not worthy of a "good grade. I open this section with the experience I had with Ethan, to demonstrate how comfortable some white students were in sharing their views, and while perhaps this vignette may be viewed as an extreme example, the forthcoming vignettes offer more manifestations of Latina/o student enactments of silence.

### **Performing Silence as Resistance**

**Immigrant Perspectives.** "Ahí me voy a quedar bien calladito."<sup>28</sup> *Joaquín*, a senior verbalized these words to me during his Immigrant Perspectives class an English senior elective. Ms. Cuomo asked her students to get into their respective groups to continue working on their projects on Tomas Rivera's *and the Earth Did Not Devour Him*. *Joaquín* was working with two

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<sup>28</sup> Translation, "I'm going to sit there and be really quiet."

popular white female students. His group decided to work out in the hallway and as he stood up from his desk he turned to me and articulated the above quote. I joined him and the group in the hallway to see how his comments would play out. *Joaquín* remained fairly quiet, only talking to inform the group that he had found a potential quote from the text to use for their project. When he spoke, he did so quietly, almost as if not to disrupt the nonacademic conversation Kendra and Allie were having. Upon hearing *Joaquín's* suggestion, Allie dismissively said, "Okay" and then returned to her conversation with Kendra. *Joaquín* continued to work independently and conferred with me a couple of times asking if I would be in any of his classes later in the day. While he did not remain quiet in the literal sense of the word, I interpreted this moment as a performance of silence. It became clear to me that *Joaquín* recognized his presence and ideas would not be valued by his group mates. Even when he spoke, his comment received scant attention. When I interviewed *Joaquín* I asked him to talk about his decision to remain quiet.

**Gabriel:** In Immigrant Perspectives, you got up and it was for a group activity, you turned to me and in Spanish you told me, "Me voy quedar bien calladito."<sup>29</sup> What prompted you to say that?

**Joaquín:** What did I say? "Calladito me veo más bonito."<sup>30</sup> I just don't feel like my opinion is - they don't care about my opinion, they already have what they want to write so I'm like I'll let them write and I'll just nod my head when they say something.

*Joaquín's* comment speaks to his awareness and knowledge that from his point of view many white students do not care to hear the opinions of Latina/o students. Yet, later in the day in his AP Spanish Literature & Culture class *Joaquín* was participating in class and joking around with his white and Latina/o classmates. The jovial relationships between Latina/o and white students in this class were not a common occurrence in other classrooms. The class was composed of nine

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<sup>29</sup> Translation: I'm going to stay really quiet.

<sup>30</sup> Translation: By staying quiet I look prettier.

Latina/o students, eight white students, and one Asian student. Most of the students were part of Frontier Middle School's<sup>31</sup> Dual Language program. Additionally, the white students in the course were not part of the white popular elite; they were part of the academically oriented group of white students who were also heavily involved in extracurricular activities. While many of the students were not close friends outside of school, in the classroom they came together by supporting one another academically and maintaining a light-hearted learning environment by joking with one another. The teacher of this course, Ms. Borges also helped by creating a classroom culture of high academic expectations that incorporated humor and indirectas<sup>32</sup> that her Latina/o students connected with and engaged in with each other. In this class, *Joaquín* attentively took notes, while also joking around with his peers. This was no mere one-time occurrence, but a regular one that I saw throughout my time at SHS. The academic performances of Latina/o identity take different shapes and will vary depending on classroom and whom they are with. The fluidity *Joaquín* engaged with speaks to the dexterity Latina/o youth possess; yet this dexterity does not necessarily mean that their enactments of identity are ones they want to engage with.

**AP Studio Art.** In one of the classes I was with *MacDaddy*, his teacher Mr. Hanks checked in with him to see what he was doing. *MacDaddy* was slightly frustrated that his drawing was not coming out the way he wanted. In an effort to cheer him up, Mr. Hanks told him a story about how the Amish worked hard and how he should not beat himself up so much. *MacDaddy* responded with, "I'm not them, I like electricity," which prompted a chuckle from

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<sup>31</sup> SHS receives students from three middle schools in Lakeview: Woodland, Maple Lane, and Frontier. Frontier is the only school with a dual language program, but the school district is looking to unify all three schools by constructing one middle school, thus expanding the dual language program.

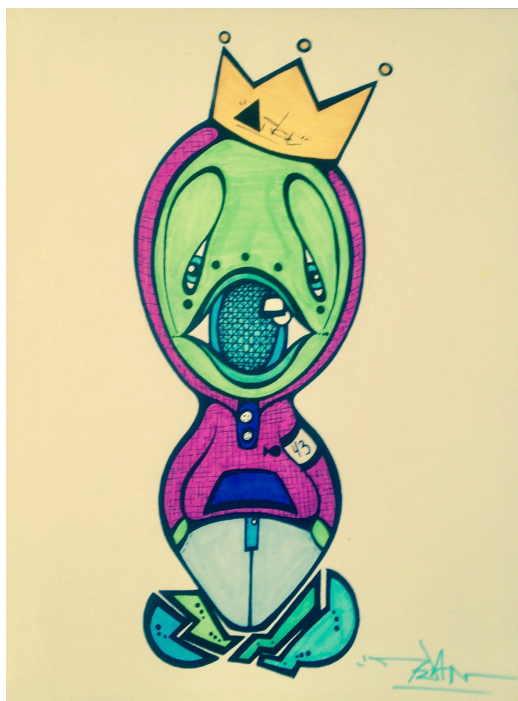
<sup>32</sup> Translation: Sideswipes

Mr. Hanks who then walked away to check in on other students. In this class, *MacDaddy* displayed his unique art sensibilities. I was impressed with how he approached his art and with what ease. Yet, when it came to register for the AP test, he opted not to take it. On that particular day, I arrived a few minutes late and took my seat in between *Mia* and *MacDaddy*, students were working and quietly talking amongst each other. Mr. Hanks had the room set up with long tables forming a U allowing him the space to walk around to talk to students. When Mr. Hanks got to where we were sitting, he filled me in on what students were working on and we began talking about the AP Art test. *MacDaddy* would go on to say that it was, “pointless” to take the test. Mr. Hanks, while disappointed also agreed with him remarking, “*MacDaddy*’s work most likely would not score well on the AP test because the graders prefer western style art.” This moment was disheartening because I felt so strongly about his art, his dedication for it. Yet perhaps deep down I also knew that *MacDaddy* was right. Not because I thought he was a bad artist or because he was incapable of excellence. I feared that the people reviewing his art would not appreciate and review it through a white middle-class lens. As I thought about that day, I asked myself why should he subject himself to potentially being rejected? Why should he submit his work for the approval for others?

**Figure 8: MacDaddy Drawing 1**

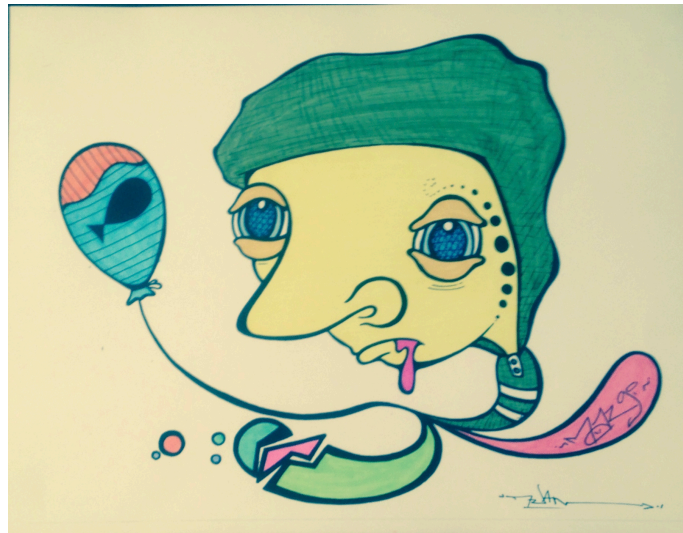


**Figure 9: MacDaddy Drawing 2**





**Figure 10: MacDaddy Drawing 3**



His art, in my view was a performance, a manifestation of his unique sense of style, of his ability to show meaning in the funky characters he created. While most of *MacDaddy's* art was mainly non-political, the second drawing features a figure whose left arm bears the number, "43." His drawing was done during the year in which 43 students studying to be teachers went missing in Iguala, Guerrero. The teachers from the Ayotzinapa Rural Teacher's College were attempting to travel to Mexico City to commemorate the anniversary of the 1968 massacre of the government killing civilian and students. This drawing, demonstrates a consciousness of what was happening in Mexico and its impact on him and his peers, particularly those whose families came from Guerrero.

*MacDaddy's* art itself is a performance, it's a reflection of his identity. It was a style *MacDaddy* had cultivated and played around with. On the one hand he is engaging in a performance of who he is, how he wants others to recognize his art. Yet, he is also recognizing, or perceiving rejection of his art by others. Rather than subject himself to that, *MacDaddy* made a choice, a choice to protect himself. He refuses to relinquish and acquiesce an aspect of his identity.

## **Pushing Back: Fighting Past the Silence**

Not all youth opted to remain quiet, particularly when it came to issues of inequality in and out of school. The fieldwork and interview data below offer some insights into how participants fought back, while also highlighting the difficulty they encountered by their white peers.

**U.S. History.** In my interview with *Camilla*, she spoke about the push back she received from white students when they disagreed with her. During my interview with her, I asked her to reflect upon a moment in her U.S. History class. On that day, Mr. Montejano read some of the responses that she and her peers wrote about concerning race at SHS. Mr. Montejano highlighted some of the issues and complexity students raised in their writing. During class, a white male student was afforded the space to read a spoken word poem to his peers. His performance offered a critique of his white peers, particularly popular white students at the school. This student, Ian was given a round of applause by the majority white class. This class also had a handful of Latina/o students of which *Lisette* and *Camilla* were part of. I asked *Camilla* to talk about how she felt about that day in class.

**Gabriel:** What did you think of that day in class?

**Camilla:** I really liked his poem. It was clear and to the point and I felt like a couple of people got kind of thrown off by what he said. “You’re white and you’re saying all of this?” But like he was specifically talking about people in our community. “Oh, my god lets go to Florida for spring break during the three-day weekend and just get tan or something.”

**Gabriel:** Do you think it would have been received differently if it was read by a Latina or Latino?

**Camilla:** It would have been seen differently. They would have said again, “You’re going to bring up your race again?” That’s usually what it tends to be. When it’s a Latina or another minority student saying something about the Lakeview community or its tendencies or actions toward other people of color. I feel like because Ian is white and Jewish, oh my god that was so powerful.

*Camilla's* observation highlights the push back Latina/o youth receive when they offer critique of the school or share their perspectives through their ethno-racial identities. Yet when Ian, a white student shares his views, he is rewarded, he is applauded, white students are left with a sense of, "Oh my god that was so powerful." In our interview, I asked *Camilla* to talk about her views as to why some Latina/o youth may shy away from bringing up race during class conversations. She responded with:

**Camilla:** They're not afraid of making anyone else uncomfortable, they're afraid of the back and forth clash. They don't want to seem like they're racist toward white people. I had this conversation with Leonardo (Latino student in her U.S. History class) the other day. I asked him why he didn't speak up in the discussion and he was like cuz no one was going to care what my view point was. They were going to answer back to me and say something that would go against what I was saying.

In her view her friend Leonardo was unwilling to offer his viewpoint because he did not want to subject himself to push back from his white peers. *Camilla* would go onto say that she did push back.

**Camilla:** I don't remember what I said, I knew that I was going to offend people and that someone was going to try and shoot the idea down, but I didn't really care (chuckles) just because I don't really talk to the people that are in my class and if they're gonna get mad at something I say so be it. I think we were talking about the education system and how it's really messed up. I raised my hand, I said okay, let's be honest do you think the Lakeview community is gonna want to do that? They're all about being at the top, they're all about cutting throats and ripping people's eye balls out just to get an A in the class. I said, how many parents do you think are going to be up for giving up their money to help someone else's kid get a better education. Right after I finished, five hands shot up and said, "Oh boy here it starts" and the bell rang. Immediately I knew what they were going to say, "Oh my parents work for the money so obviously, they're paying more for my education and not for someone else's." I don't know when you say things that go against what people believe when it has to do with race or economic standing or anything at all and they feel offended and what you're saying its wrong they'll immediately try and shoot down what they say and I know the majority of Latinos know that's going to happen so they just don't want to have to go through that.

*Camilla's* response shows us her awareness that the likelihood of receiving opposition from her viewpoints are high. This awareness is a reflection of her knowledge of her white peers and

having grown up with them and interacting with them in school. Yet, felt that despite the odds of criticism and frustration with it, that for her it was worth the fight. Her observation also demonstrates how ready some white students are to defend their privilege. Similarly, during my interview with *Richard*, he too shared a similar experience he had his junior year in American Perspectives. *Richard's* American Perspectives class was having a conversation about power and who is in the sphere of influence and who is on the outside looking in.

**Richard:** We were talking about (inaudible) circle and who's on the outside and then everybody going up to the board was white, everyone and I was observing, and I intentionally didn't want to go because I wanted to see what the Latino students in my class would do. Some of them weren't paying attention and others were sitting down watching. Then I went up last and I forgot what I said specifically, but I know it had to do with race and specifically at Shields High School. Latinos are on the outside, whites on the inside. Ms. Cuomo gave me this look, like a smirk, like, "you're on to something, I know what you're doing." Then everyone looked at me and Ms. Cuomo said, we're going to talk about it." It was literally me against everyone else. It was just me saying, I see that a lot of Latinos don't make any decisions in the school, they're not part of the whole process either and all that kind of stuff and then I'm like look at what just happened. I got a lot of criticism from it. They got really defensive, very defensive. "That's ridiculous, I don't see that, I don't see privilege. I have Mexican friends." It made it very, very uncomfortable. I'm like, "Bro, Latinos speak, please! It was just me and like literally saying I see this, I see that, what about that student council, blah, blah, blah and at the end of the day I'm glad I brought it up, but honestly Shields High School is not ready for change and that's how I felt leaving class.

*Richard* was in a position where he needed support. His teacher was supportive and wanting to have a conversation. Yet, this experience proved to be a frustrating one for *Richard*, leaving him with a desire to say, "Latinos speak, please." Yet, his Latina/o peers did not jump in and support, leaving him to fend off white student opposition on his own.

In these moments both *Camilla* and *Richard* were moved to say something about how SHS operated, raising critical issues surrounding schooling, school involvement, race and class. White students were quick to critique, dismiss whatever information he was sharing. Moreover, *Richard's* commentary also reveals how even in a classroom with other Latina/os students

there's no guarantee that they will support one another. Their silence, while it varies, should not be seen as an alignment with white students necessarily. Other Latina/o students know what *Camilla* and *Richard* voiced in the vignettes above, but they feel that putting themselves out there is not worth their time. They rather avoid a potentially negative and exhausting experience by not engaging or waiting for a different time to voice or support critique.

Unlike *Juaquin* and *MacDaddy*, who chose not to speak up, *Camilla* and *Richard* opted to not remain silent. They decided to push back, making an observation. Yet as they both noted, they received a lot of critique from white students. As *Camilla* noted white students will, "[...] immediately try and shoot down" whatever Latina/o students have to say. So, as she puts it, "[...] they don't want to have to go through that" Yet whenever a white student articulates a similar message as in the case of Ian, other white students are more open to the message. When I asked *Richard* to talk about why he thought that was the case, *Richard* said, "I wish I knew, I wish I knew, they LOVE to talk. They just won't stop and maybe because they are loud in general, even with their friends, maybe it's because they feel comfortable in the class too, but I wish I knew." In hearing him respond to my question, in many respects I think he does know, his comment about being comfortable, about them loving to talk speaks to schooling practices that inculcate the importance of talking in class, participating and being rewarded for it. More importantly, it is about whose voices are sanctioned and rewarded.

### **Performing Silence: Silenced Erasure**

In speaking with *Xóchitl*, we get another dimension of silence. During our interview, I asked her to describe the social scene at SHS.

**Gabriel:** How would you describe the social scene at SHS?

**Xóchitl:** Terrible.

**Gabriel:** Why is it terrible?

**Xóchitl:** Like when you're with your Mexican friends some white people don't acknowledge you when you're in the hallways and you see someone that you know and it's like they're with their white friends and they don't see you but when you're playing sports they know you're there and they start talking to you differently than when they talk to you outside of sports.

**Gabriel:** Does it bother you?

**Xóchitl:** Yeah! At times it does, but it's the way people are.

**Gabriel:** Is that something that you were expecting or not expecting when you came to SHS?

**Xóchitl:** Yeah, I did volleyball and soccer there (referring to middle school) as well and everywhere you went all your teammates would say hi to you, but here it's different like they know you're there, but they don't say hi to you so it's totally different.

In listening to *Xóchitl* we get the sense of how Latina/o students are rendered inconsequential, invisible in non-academic spaces, such as walking in the hallway. White students know that Latina/o students exist, but because of their power, opt to ignore them, unless it is necessary to speak to Latina/o students. Another example of this sort of silencing was in *Lisette's* English class.

**AP Language and Composition.** On this day, I had walked with *Lisette* from her U.S. History class and we talked about our respective weekends and how our days had been going. We came in the room and she took her seat and I sat across from her. Ms. Holmes began class by reviewing the agenda for the class period. Students were reading *The Great Gatsby*. *Lisette* was taking down notes as Ms. Holmes went over her expectations. She then had her students get into what she called their learning groups. *Lisette* stood up, walked to where I was seated and joined her groupmates. She was working with a female Asian student and two white female students. *Lisette* began to say something to the group but right as she started the two white female students spoke and took the lead by suggesting to the group they begin reading the text out loud.

Ms. Holmes walked around the room, checking in with groups. When she got to *Lisette's* group, the white female students again took the lead to initiate conversation, while *Lisette* took down notes. The white students continued to delegate tasks to *Lisette* and the female Asian student in the group, yet these white students also took time to engage in social conversation, all the while excluding their group mates. Like what *Xóchitl* experienced, white students in this case were dictating when they wanted to acknowledge and make *Lisette* visible. When I asked *Lisette* to talk about her experiences in this class and with her group members she responded, “Were you in English yesterday, the ginger one. She’s one of the girls I just can’t handle, she wants to be the one talking, she wants to be the one answering the questions. Those are the people that I don’t like.” To further complicate this white female student, she was not part of a popular white clique, she was part of a white clique of white female students that was involved in extracurricular activities and did well in school, so the notion that it is only the popular students who are silencing Latina/o youth would be a mistake. Similarly, Latina/o youth are also silenced by years of schooling in the community.

### **Performing Silence: Conditioned into Silence**

Most participants spoke about why they and other Latina/o students did not talk much in their classes. *J. Cole* offered his perspective:

**J. Cole:** It’s probably built up over the years. Where they can go through an entire class and never talk, and the teacher won’t call on them. A lot of teachers will try to incorporate everyone into the conversation. I’m sure it’s happened where teachers don’t notice or care, so they won’t call on them, so they’re not used to speaking in classes.

*J. Cole's* comment speaks to the fact that silence in the classroom is not a high school phenomenon, that it is something that has been occurring since childhood, that Latina/o youth are conditioned and come to believe that their role in the class is to remain quiet. *Jackie* and *Jay*

talked about what was at stake for them if they spoke to participate in class. In my interview with *Jackie*, she said:

**Jackie:** In my science class last year, I wasn't comfortable. I hate science, it's always been my least favorite subject, so I was shy in the class and I was the only Hispanic. I don't know what made me not participate, maybe I was scared if I said something it would be wrong and then I would get judged, but then I don't know they would just kind of look at me and I would get embarrassed. I don't know what made me not participate, but I think it was mostly I wasn't comfortable in the class.

For *Jackie*, her silence spoke to a lack of comfort, she talks about what is at stake for her when she speaks in class. She is afraid of making a mistake in class, fearing judgement from her peers.

*Jay* goes further into why he at times does not talk. In my interview he shared the following:

**Jay:** For APES (AP Environmental Science) I look at it in the sense that I feel like I'm held accountable. If I say something too loud or too in a way doubt, I change, I'm also intimidated. In Immigrant Perspectives, there are more students, so I feel more open, but with these classes, these are the kids (referring to white students) that you would label as smart and that's why I'm a little bit more quiet. So, intimidation, I'm the only Latino, I need to show things differently.

Seeing *Jay* in his Immigrant Perspectives class and then in his AP Environmental Science class the next period, he would be engaged in the course content, but his demeanor was quieter, he was actively trying to keep up with taking notes. For *Jay*, performing this silence, focused academic identity was crucial for navigating his science class. For *Jay*, a lot was at stake, he was aware that white students are the ones who are rewarded for their success, so the intimidation factor was higher in a class composed of all white students with the exception of him and *Liliana*.

Unlike *Jay* and *Jackie*, silence was a performance that allowed Latina/o youth not to "rock the boat." In speaking with participants, they spoke about not wanting to bring attention to themselves. For instance, *Juaquin* said, "We don't like participating, we don't like bringing attention to ourselves. Especially me, I may have an idea, but naw." In continuing our conversation about white students, I would go on to ask him:



**Gabriel:** Have there been times when white students say things that you disagree with?

**Juaquin:** Yeah, many times, I just let them say what they say.

**Gabriel:** Do you think if you speak more often they would be afraid or disagree?

**Juaquin:** Probably disagree.

In speaking with *MacDaddy*:

**MacDaddy:** Yea. They say a lot of things they think they know about.

**Gabriel:** Right. So, for me I'm curious what makes you guys not speak up or not challenge them more I guess?

**MacDaddy:** Because we know they're ignorant and we know they're saying it- first they want a good grade in the class.

**Gabe:** Mhm.

**MacDaddy:** Second, they'd be- I think we'd scare them if we told them what life was really like. Like if we, if I told them that you used to live in a house with like three or four on one floor like, they'd be like, oh I used to live in a house with one floor with my family it's like, but there's a huge difference.

Like *MacDaddy*, *Xóchitl* felt like she had to temper her ideas, because white students did not understand or care for her experience.

**Gabriel:** Do you think there's pressure to act a certain way in classes given that you may have a class that's all white sometimes?

**Xóchitl:** Yeah. In Patterns, there's so many white kids that you have to act a certain way. When they ask you questions it's kind of hard on you. When we did Mexico (referring to unit) it was kind of hard not to say anything because they (referring to white students) would say they play soccer or try to speak Spanish and you're trying to calm down and not say anything rude.

**Gabriel:** So, what were some of the things you wanted to say?

**Xóchitl:** Well they were being racist, I guess they weren't saying anything, but they were being stereotypical and saying how we only play soccer and how we speak Spanish all the time at our house. I wanted to say something, but I have a bad temper, so I had to calm myself down.

**Gabriel:** Do you feel white students would push back or they would understand?

**Xóchitl:** I think some would understand where we are coming from, but some don't even care what we say, and they base things on what they heard and not what we're saying.

Rather than confront and speak up, all participants like *MacDaddy* and *Xóchitl* suffered from microaggressions. Rather than experiencing further discomfort, they feel like it will be of little use for them to speak up and choose to silence themselves in the moment. Other times, staff in an effort to engage their students inadvertently provided a space for white students to talk about their aspirations without realizing its silencing impact on Latina/o youth. In a business class, *Joaquín* was one of two Latino students in the course. The class was smaller on this day as juniors took the ACT earlier in the day and were given early dismissal. Mr. Oliver started class by talking about their college options. He spoke about going to community college and the importance of transferring. Mr. Oliver spoke very highly to his class about community college being a path to save money. He noted how his partner was still paying off her debt. He then talked about it being okay for students to take a year off if they felt it was something they thought was best for them. The 12 students in the class were then asked to share what their plans were after graduation. Most of the white students listed which university they were going to attend. Many of the students were going to select liberal arts colleges or prestigious large universities like the University of Southern California. One student noted that he was going to take a gap year abroad and then attend the university that had accepted him. During this class, I kept looking over at *Joaquín*, who looked timid, focused his attention to his notebook, hoping he would not get called upon. Another student talked about backpacking in Cambodia. When it was *Joaquín's* turn, he quietly said he was not sure and when pressed by Mr. Oliver, he said that he was thinking about Bradley, Northern Illinois, and DePaul University. In hearing *Joaquín* speak, I was reminded of his timid nature around some white students, it was as if he was mumbling. None of the schools he was considering were, "bad" options, but I kept thinking how he feels

hearing his white peers talking about backpacking, taking a gap year, and attending elite schools. In this moment, in what seemed like an effort on the part of an educator to talk about higher education, turned into an enactment of silence, tepidness for *Joaquín*.

### **Impact of Silence on Latina/o Identity**

During interviews, I talked to each participant about whether or not they felt like they had to downplay certain parts of their identity, if they ever felt uncomfortable beyond feeling silenced. Most participants spoke that to some degree they felt like had. *Hannah* spoke to how she has experienced this since an early age, she said:

**Hannah:** I think in middle school, elementary school I couldn't talk about certain celebrations. I had to seek out the few Latino students. I think one of the biggest things for my mom is for me to assimilate the right way. I think I've learned how to do that at an early age

Clearly, what Latina/o youth experience is not new, they have been dealing and coping with it since an early age as *Hannah* attested to. To some extent, this notion of youth being used to it seems like they have acquiesced, but what the youth of this study have demonstrated is that their silence is a mechanism for survival and strategizing for when to voice dissension. Their silence is sometimes a way for them to fit in and an effort to maintain old friends, but for *Jackie*, she spoke about feeling pressured to downplay her Latina identity when arriving at SHS. She spoke about having white female friends growing up, but she reached a point where she felt like she had to choose and eventually drifted away from them. In speaking about some of the reasons she drifted away from her white friends she said:

**Jackie:** Like I can say freshman and sophomore year when we had reading tutoring in these rooms, that's when I was friends with my old friends. It's not that I would get embarrassed, I'd say I had to go somewhere. I didn't tell them I was in Greenberg, I don't know why. I wasn't embarrassed I just didn't tell them I was in Greenberg for some reason. So, when I would come in this room, I'd come out and they'd ask, and I'd say I was with a tutor. They would just look at me and say that's kind of weird that I was in this room with a tutor and I didn't want to tell them I was in Greenberg. "Oh, you're in a

scholarship program, does that mean you don't have enough money to go to college." I was kind of hiding, not hiding, keeping stuff, not telling them stuff that I was involved in, but then once, but then as I grew up, I don't know I feel like I act, I don't act a certain way. I like to just be me.

Some of the issues *Jackie* raises speak to the perceptions she felt from her white students. Issues of class surfaced when she thought her friends found out about her membership in Greenberg would be negatively viewed. Ultimately, she came to the realization that she did keep certain information away from them, but ultimately found a place where could be herself. Some of the most heart wrenching responses about downplaying their identity came from *Lisette* and *Bob the Builder*. When I asked *Lisette* the question about her identity and whether she felt she changed when she was around white students. *Lisette* responded with, "I never had the experience that I don't want to be Honduran. Obviously being a Latina is different, there are times I wish I was white, but being Honduran is something I've never regretted." Later in my interview with her she spoke about a few times when she downplayed or questioned the way she presented herself to others.

**Gabriel:** Would you say being Honduran is important to you?

**Lisette:** Oh, yeah definitely. I was born there and lived there for 5, 6 years and I've lived here for 8 years. I'm getting used to American tradition and there's this combo of having to balance my Honduran life and my life at home with being here and a white environment. Sometimes I have to change who I am in order to fit in. I've realized that I've changed stuff about me, but if I'm proud of who I am why am I changing. Why do I keep stuff away from white culture?

*Lisette* would provide an example by talking about time in soccer.

**Gabriel:** Is there a specific moment where you've done that?

**Lisette:** During soccer yesterday, I was like, "Why did I do that?" I called my mom and like there's times when I'm around white people and I don't want to speak in Spanish and they ask, "Do your parents not speak English?" It bothers me sometimes that I wish my parents would speak in English, I feel like I would fit in more. I try to do Spanglish with my parents.

*Lisette* is wrestling with her ethno-racial pride, while wanting to fit in. She is frustrated by having to explain things to her white peers about why her parents may not speak English to her. In many respects, *Lisette* and others are not asking for much. As has been argued throughout, their search for affirmation and acceptance can lead them to problematic statements, but when placed in context we need to understand why they are saying these things. When I asked *Bob the Builder* a similar question, by asking him about what sort of person we would see throughout the day, he said:

**Bob the Builder:** Sometimes they would see someone who is quiet, someone who keep to himself but then at the other time they would see someone who is intelligent someone who speaks his own mind someone who does whatever he wants.

The silence *Bob the Builder* submitted himself to and was subjected to also speaks to how silence is embodied by Latina/o youth. There is a clear recognition on the part of student participants that they felt they did not matter, that they were not smart or worthy of the opportunities SHS had to offer. Yet, when youth embodied identities meaningful to them they felt like they could do whatever they want. Begging the question, what do identities that are meaningful to Latina/o youth look like? What are the tensions that arise in attempting to enact these identities, what do Latina/o youth think about the moments they feel like their authentic selves?

## Chapter 5 “Sorry not Sorry:” The Interplay y Movidas of Performing Authenticity

“The truth was that I didn’t know which I was. I wasn’t allowed to claim the thing I felt and I didn’t feel the thing I was supposed to claim”

Christina Henríquez, *The Book of Unknown Americans*

Since a very early age, I have been taught how to assimilate into white culture. I have been trained to hide the part of me that identifies as Latina or Mexican. Throughout all these years, I have learned that people who do not master the art of dual consciousness and assimilation do not succeed in our world today. I have seen people look down on my father because of how coarse and dark his skin is. I have witnessed my mother’s thick accent and broken English cause discomfort to those who know the language well. Even I have been lashed at for sharing my honest opinions that reveal my Mexican identity. Brown has never truly been acceptable by the people in this country, and this fact is clear to children who identify with anything other than white. In my AP classes, many who don’t know me are surprised to see me walk through the door. And while my beliefs and commentaries continue to be put down, I have learned to stand up and represent the Latino voice in my school and community. I have seen other Latinos, like myself, who are working hard to achieve great things. Together, we will be the leaders of tomorrow—not just of the Latino community but of the world as a whole. We are hybrids living in one world belonging to another but never fully accepted in either. I want to help non-hybrids understand our experience so that they can fully accept us for who we are.

Camilla,<sup>33</sup> “Hybrid”

Students trickled in and assumed their customary seats in Mr. Montejano’s U.S. History class. *Lisette* entered and opted to sit in a different desk, while this class did not have assigned seats most students claimed a desk of their own. In an effort to disrupt the norm *Lisette* placed her things where a fellow Latino student sat. Upon entering a few seconds later, Jaime, who was not too keen on relocating to a different desk asked *Lisette* to move. In a brief moment of playful resistance, *Lisette* grinned and showcased her black t-shirt with bright pink and yellow-green text that read, “Sorry not Sorry.” After some continued groaning from Jaime, *Lisette* acquiesced and moved to her usual seat in the class. While seemingly inconsequential, the exchange between *Lisette* and Jaime is important to this chapter because it was a moment in

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<sup>33</sup> All student participants when mentioned will be italicized for clarity.

which *Lisette* was unapologetically asserting herself. It got me to think about other moments in which Latina/o youth claimed identities that were meaningful to them.

Ultimately what does authenticity look like for Latina/o youth at SHS? How does it vary and what role do Latina/o and white students play? What role does space (e.g., class, college access programs) play in shaping authenticity for Latina/o youth? I argue that authenticity is situational, mediated by space and by the people participants of the study are with. As was written about in chapter 3, identities are outcomes of the social interactions we have with others. As Stuart Hall (1990) argues they are acts of production. Moreover, in writing about Indian American Youth in New York City, Sunaina Maira (2002) writes, “Authenticity is an ideology shaped by complex historical and political processes within any subculture or community and is a difficult creature with which to do battle, as the sometimes-contradictory discourses and performances of ethnic purity among second-generation youth suggest” (p. 136). Having this orientation toward authenticity and identity is essential toward understanding the complexities in play for the student participants of this study.

### **Authenticity is in the Eye of the Beholder**

**SPOTLIGHT.** During the first year of my fieldwork in April, SHS hosted its biannual art festival entitled SPOTLIGHT. Intended to feature student work, SHS also brings in various performers and local celebrities. SHS dedicates a whole week to SPOTLIGHT and school days are blocked off for students and staff to attend different sessions. I was seated in the school’s auditorium having just listened to a Q & A session from a college network executive, I parted ways with *Jay* and was looking to go elsewhere when I saw *Joaquín* and *MacDaddy* hanging out with some of their male friends. I walked over to where they were seated to watch the next session.

As I took my seat next to *MacDaddy*, *Joaquín* was being called a “snake” for wanting to move to a different part of the auditorium to sit next to Myriam whom he wanted to ask out to prom. After withstanding a playful verbal onslaught of criticism from his friends he rose to his feet and moved to sit with Myriam. During this time students trickled in and took their seats. Marcos and a group of his friends were cracking jokes as they entered. Upon hearing them, Leo with a tone of disgust slowly said, “Oh my God.” Marcos and his friends sat a few rows behind us. Shortly thereafter, *Liliana* walks in with a group of white female students, she sees me and excitedly remarks, “GABE!” In turn, *MacDaddy* in a slow pace and tone only I and his friends could hear remarked, “Just keep walking” and pointed his water bottle at her. *Liliana* did not notice and proceeded to take a seat near the front of the auditorium. Performances started, most students quietly watched, applauded, and cheered.

During the performances *MacDaddy* and his friends intermittently talked to one another in hushed voices. Behind us, Marcos and his friends were not as quiet, they were commenting about their disinterest in the performances. At one point a performer on stage was talking with the audience and Marcos interpreted his mode of speaking as non-masculine and uttered, “Habla bien guey.”<sup>34</sup> The guys I was seated with grumbled and a group of white female juniors often showed their displeasure by turning back and throwing dirty looks and commenting amongst themselves. Ms. Lennox, one of the college counselors supervising the area asked them to quiet down and to remain respectful. *MacDaddy* turned to me and said, “If you don’t want to be here, then don’t.” He then briefly sympathized by talking about how the performances were boring. As the remaining modern dance companies performed their sets, I could not stop thinking about the fast moving and complex interplay between these three sets of Latina/o students.

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<sup>34</sup> Translation: Talk write dumbass



In this vignette, you have whiteness setting the stage for how Latina/o students at SHS should behave. On the one hand, you have *MacDaddy* who is making it clear that *Liliana* is not welcomed. You then have *MacDaddy* and his friends who are not happy with Marcos and his group of friends talking. Yet you have *MacDaddy* in his group who were also talking during the performances. These three sets of cliques, these three sets of Latinidad were all brushing up against one another and to me it seems like *MacDaddy* and his friends were saying that *Liliana* is too white, they were saying that Marcos and his friends were fueling stereotypes of how some in the school perceive them and that they themselves perhaps are performing an identity that is authentic, one that is able to be valued or accepted or at the very least tolerated within the confines of SHS.

This vignette begins to unpack some of the major issues at play for how Latina/o youth present themselves toward one another and their white peers. The data of this chapter discusses the points of convergence and divergence revolving around notions of performing whiteness, performing the stereotype and performing authenticity.

### **Performing Whiteness?**

A lot was at stake for Latina/o youth who hung out with white students. For *Liliana*, it became quickly apparent that some of her Latina/o peers had labeled her as someone who was not sympathetic to her community, someone who was more comfortable with white youth. In shadowing her, she often did sit next to white students, some of which were her friends. She often shared similar experiences with them, she at times dressed like some of the white students by wearing some of the brand clothing they wore and shared some of the spaces they navigated in. For instance, *Liliana* would eat her lunch in the College Resource Center (CRC), which will be discussed in greater length in the next chapter. This was a space that was predominately used

by academically oriented white students. In my interview with her, she spoke the perceptions she felt some Latina/o students had about her.

**Liliana:** There was this idea that I was better than myself just because I went to Woodland. Hispanics were mean and so I avoided them on all terms. The expectations that you were going to get judged or bullied by Hispanics vs. White, I found it Hispanic vs. Hispanic.

Unlike many of the participants in the study, *Liliana* went to a middle school in the community that was predominately white and was located in an affluent area of Lakeview. Unlike her other peers who went to slightly more diverse middle schools *Liliana* felt more comfortable around white students. “I think I have a bias just because I went to Woodland. So, I know most of them (referring to white students).” *Liliana* spoke about how she had close friendships with other Latina youth, but drifted apart because of different priorities further setting her apart from the Latina/o community. What was at stake for her and other students who did not social with Latina/o youth had repercussions on how they were seen. In interviewing participants, several spoke about what they thought were the implications or motivations. In talking about this issue, students often talked about race by juxtaposing Latina/o versus whiteness/white students.

**Gabriel:** Do you think going into a school that has a lot of white students, do you think there are pressures to act a certain way, either to act more Latino or to act more white?

**Jacobo:** Yeah, yeah. I guess we can choose what we want to do. Acculturation or assimilation. I think a good number of Latinos choose to assimilate. I don’t want to say, I don’t want to say it’s bad, certain people were born and raised here. Perhaps their idea about being Mexican and their traditions they don’t know about that, but the other people who weren’t born here that I have a problem with. You shouldn’t have to forget about who you are and your identity in the past but certainly for Latinos in general it’s about assimilation, it’s about fitting in, it’s about not being Latino.

For *Jacobo*, as an immigrant student who came to the U.S. as a small child from Honduras, he was more understanding and sympathetic of some of the issues second generation youth he felt experienced. He was more willing to entertain the idea of why some second-generation youth

would want to assimilate. But for immigrant youth like himself, he had a harsher viewpoint. In my interview with *Bob the Builder*, he shared another aspect that youth must grapple with.

**Gabriel:** What do you think when a Latino student mainly hangs out with White students?

**Bob the Builder:** Yeah (laughs). White washed I would call it. I do have - I don't want to call him a friend, a classmate I guess. We don't really hang out. He hangs out with a bunch of um what's it called, a bunch of white people and basically, I feel like he lost his accent too. He has nothing. When he tries to talk he sounds like someone who is trying to learn for the very first time.

**Gabriel:** Any ideas why he hangs out with white kids?

**Bob the Builder:** Maybe he just feels more comfortable with them. Because I feel more comfortable with Latino students. Maybe he feels more comfortable with having white friends or being with white students.

For *Bob the Builder*, the student he was talking about had no cultural connection, therefore in his view this student had “nothing.” His commentary should make us reflect upon the pressure that some students that are in a position like *Liliana* must undergo. What sorts of spaces can be created where meaningful conversation can take place where varying types of Latinidad can be honor and understood in context. *Bob the Builder's* perspective does raise a critical point of not only what is at stake, but perhaps at what expense does acceptance or inclusion come by? *Jacobo* and *Bob the Builder's* comments serve as a point of entry into complicating what is at stake with interacting mainly with white students. In talking to *Joaquín* and *Michelle*, they bring different elements that help unpack some of the polarizing views some Latina/o students hold.

**Gabriel:** What goes through your head when you see a Latina/o student mainly hang out with white students?

**Joaquín:** Mmm (pause) I think maybe their smart, maybe they don't like hanging out with this (referring to Latina/o students) crowd. I don't really think bad of them, it's their decision.

**Gabriel:** Why do you think they hang out with the white students?

**Joaquín:** Maybe because they have the same interests. My sister used to be one of those people and I would make fun of her. Maybe you're trying to hide your culture, but they don't I guess, they have preferences or things in common with them.

**Gabriel:** Do you feel there are judgements within the Latina/o student body about so and so isn't Mexican enough or so and so is so dumb or doesn't try hard enough. What are some of the tensions that exist within the Latina/o student body?

**Michelle:** I think that a lot of times Latino students will look at people that aren't like them as like white washed or something and they'll see that as bad and won't talk to those people. I think you have to be a certain way to be actually be considered Latino.

**Gabriel:** Do you feel you fall into the group of being an acceptable Latina or do you feel like you have to fight that battle?

**Michelle:** I feel like sometimes I have to fight it. Sometimes I feel like oh like with I don't know with *Jackie* and Elizabeth and some of our friends sometimes I do feel like I have to act a certain way. I have to not kind of care so much about school and kind of like I don't know act tough and in a way that's not really me sometimes, but that's not really, I'm not like them and so yeah it is hard I think. I think they think of me sometimes like oh she's not Mexican enough. For me now that I'm leaving, and I know where I'm going and there's a long future ahead of me, I don't really mind it, I'm not going to make a big deal out of it, I'm not going to change who I am.

What also became apparent with the youth was that there were gendered differences in how they interpreted youth who were closer to white students. The gendered differences also should not be lost on the part of white educators in the building, particularly in how students are tracked academically. The likelihood of Latina students being tracked into honors or AP classes was higher than it was for male students at SHS. In so doing it put them in contact with more white students. Male youth were more likely to perhaps find respite within their own-ethno racial community and feel solidary amongst one another. Ultimately, we are left to still think about what does acting white mean? As *Abigail* put it, "I hate when people say you're acting white, what does that mean? That's weird. I feel like you do act different, I think everyone tries to be the same, but you don't want to be different, but you are different." While *Abigail* and *Michelle* were more willing to confront notions of acting white because of their desire to succeed

academically, I argue that Latina/o youth are not acting white, but instead are playing with whiteness and performing elements of it in incredibly savvy ways to survive the contexts they are in. Latina/o students who have more contact with white students, have developed skills with how to put up with the negative issues they may experience. Students navigating predominately white spaces, are highly aware of the racial boundaries and use it to their advantage to get by. Another issue Latina/o youth contended with, was avoiding being labeled as someone who was the “stereotypical” Latina/o student.

### **Performing the Stereotype**

**Immigrant Perspectives.** Students had finished taking a quiz and they began to socialize with one another while Ms. Cuomo got ready for the next portion of class. A Latino student walked in late which prompted *MacDaddy*, *Joaquín*, *Jay* and other Latino students to slowly clap and gave him a hard time for being late. Ms. Cuomo had her students take out a piece of paper to work on a writing exercise for a few minutes. She asked her students not to worry about grammar or organization. She wanted them to write as freely as they possibly could. All the students in the class began writing, briefly taking breaks to think about what they wanted to write. *Jay* and *MacDaddy* also dived into their writing while *Joaquín* sat and did not write. A few minutes had passed, and *Joaquín*’s friends had already written half a page. At this point, I was curious as to what *Joaquín* was doing, initially I thought he was brainstorming, but then *Jay* turned to him and looked at him as to say, “Why aren’t you writing?” and *Joaquín* just shrugged his shoulders. He then proceeded to take his notebook in his hands, lifted it up and had his friends look at it as he pointed to the empty page with a smile on his face. A few seconds later, Ms. Cuomo brought the class back together by starting her lesson. Upon Ms. Cuomo talking,

*Joaquín* began to write feverishly, he was hunched over his notebook, writing and in a matter of a couple of minutes had wrote a page and a half of text.

This was such a fascinating moment for me to think about. I had seen *Joaquín* engage in this class before, he joked around with his friends, but rarely did he ever disengage in such a way. To me I interpreted this moment of him embodying an academic identity that on the surface showed that he did not care. *Joaquín* was proud of the fact he was not writing when others were. He was engaging in a performance that had been ascribed to Latina/o youth at SHS, that they did not care or try. Yet, for *Joaquín* he *did* care and in fact proceeded to write more than any of the people around him. This student was someone who downplayed his intelligence. He did not want the attention, in fact whenever called upon he would deflect and joke around by asking or telling his teachers to call on someone else. At other times he would say he did not know the answer, but often he did. When I interviewed *Joaquín*, we spoke about how Latina/o students are perceived at SHS. We spoke about what problems he thought existed at the school:

**Gabriel:** What do you think are some of the problems at the high school?

**Joaquín:** One is the soccer team doesn't get many praise, we get really mad. We're like why don't they do this, we get pretty mad. That's one problem. You see the segregation right away. I don't know of many other problems. I guess me, and my friends hate people who put a bad name out there for Latinos. Why are you doing this, don't be stupid, you're making us look back.

**Gabriel:** Are these other Latino students?

**Joaquín:** They're other Latino students. They like dissing class. Like why? This is why they don't like us here because of all the problems you guys cause.

In his response, *Joaquín* spoke about how he and his friends hate when people as he said, "put a bad name out there for Latinos. Why are you doing this, don't be stupid, you're making us look back." Because some white students have a negative perception of Latina/o youth, for Latina/o students to joke around, not do homework, to talk back to their teachers among other actions hurt

Latina/o youth at SHS. Yet, on the surface one may wonder why did *Joaquín* perform the way he did in his Immigrant Perspectives class? In analyzing that class session, I interpreted that *Joaquín* walked a fine line between performing the stereotype that exists for Latina/o youth and performing notions of coolness and intelligence, where he is telling his friends I do not need all that time to write. *Joaquín's* actions though also must be complicated because he was a student who had been tracked into opportunity, what about youth who had not? In speaking with *Jacobo*, he spoke about some of the other issues within the Latina/o student body.

**Jacobo:** To fit in with Latinos sometimes we discriminate our own. Part of the problem when I arrived was my accent. I talked funny and so I definitely changed my vocabulary. I started swearing a lot in Mexican Spanish and I did certain things to fit in. In high school, I also did certain things the way I dressed, the people I tried to talk to that was a problem, that was a problem in general with me and I think that's why I was doing so bad in school because I was trying to fit in and trying to assimilate.

Early in *Jacobo's* high school career, he struggled academically, and he felt he was trying too hard to fit in, by acting out, by attempting to appeal to Mexican culture, by engaging in their practices, by swearing in "Mexican Spanish." But there are costs to these performances as we saw in the vignette that opened this section between *MacDaddy*, *Liliana*, and Marcos. For *Liliana*, she believes she is being authentic to herself, but others may not see that way, for *Joaquín* and for other students who downplay their intelligence or parts of their identity, that may be authentic, meaningful to them in that particular moment, ultimately who has ownership, who gets to decide on what is authentic. In speaking with participants, they shared what they thought was meaningful to them, what they wanted to claim.

### **Understanding Authenticity**

During interviews I asked participants to talk about what their identities, particularly their ethno-racial identities meant to them. There was a lot of overlap in responses revolving around the importance of feeling comfortable around people that looked and spoke like them.

Participants spoke about the importance in connecting or reconnecting with their culture. For *Xóchitl*, she can be her authentic self when she is in spaces with people who look like her, “You’re so comfortable with who you’re sitting with that like everybody makes you feel comfortable. Being with all Latinos it’s so comfortable, you can be yourself and you don’t have to pretend someone you’re not.” But what specifically about being around people who are similar to you enable Latina/o youth to feel comfortable?

**Mia:** I feel like to be a Latina you don’t have to be straight up with your culture and be wavering around a Mexican flag or wherever you are from or celebrating every holiday. What it means you have to take away from the whole culture, you take parts of your culture things you want and don’t want. As a Latina I feel like I would take away that we’re very strong and passionate and very caring, so I feel like that’s something that you take from.

**Abigail:** I’ve thought about this a lot actually. I think being Mexican or Latina is super special. We have so many traditions and culture. I feel like it’s a family of everyone like you’ll be oh you’re from Guerrero, I’m from San Luis. It’s just so happy. Its soo I don’t know cheerful and I love being Mexican even though it’s tough, it’s really tough we’re a target group in the United States. I love it because we have traditions that bring us together and that make our lives interesting and I can’t imagine my life without being Mexican because I think it would be boring.

**Jacobo:** Yeah definitely, like I said I, yeah. I think had I not, had I not been Honduran I would not be the person I am today. I think I’m blessed to be an immigrant. To some being an immigrant is a setback, but it’s really not. It’s not bad, it certainly means we have to do extra things, run an extra mile, but it’s something encouraging, something within me, something I can’t change, and I’ve learned to accept it.

**Jay:** I’m not going to lie, I’m ashamed when I look back at it. When I was growing up I don’t know if I was ashamed, but I would associate with the American side. More times than not I was confused for not being Mexican. I looked at it as bad as being Mexican, so I would distance myself in middle school being the only Latino in my classes. I would distance myself as much like I would do different classes and acting. As I’ve gotten older I’m proud, I’m not ashamed, it’s who I am. If I’m going to be the only one, I need to represent. I would say now, I look at it with pride no matter where I go.

Each spoke about the difficulties of being Latina/o, having to attend a predominately white school, for being Latina/o in a country that is a “target group” in the U.S. *Jay* spoke about feeling ashamed of who he was, but as he noted he was able to overcome that and find a group of friends



that were accepting, who allowed him to display parts of himself he wanted to claim. *Jay* able to find a level of peace and acceptance of his ethno-racial identity through his participation in ethnically-based programming while also still managing to remain friends with white and Latina/o friends. He had found friends who made an effort to understand and affirm who he is.

During the second year of the study, *Abigail* along with *Lisette* were part of a gym class that helped mentor freshman students. This gym class, PE Leaders inculcated the importance of leadership. At the end of the semester, students were asked to prepare motivational speeches. They were asked to impart what they wanted their freshman students to know about SHS. Students wanted freshman to understand the importance of exploration by getting out of their comfort zones. *Abigail* decided to direct her speech to the Latina/o student body. When it came to her day to deliver her speech she was nervous, class had assembled at a conference room in the front of the high school. Beside her classmates watching, her teacher had asked administrators and teachers to sit in the audience to help provide feedback. The audience included, an assistant vice principal, the activities director and, the principal, Dr. Solverson. One by one students delivered their speeches.

*Abigail*, who sat next to me stood up walked to the front of the conference room. She put her notes down in the table in front of her. She said:

Welcome today is your first day of high school. High school is different from middle school, you need to know how to play the game. You need to know who your MVPs are. Everything that you do will impact you. You are one step away from the real world. One of the challenges is being a minority. Personally, there were days when I didn't want to go to class, but you can do this! You are strong because we are Latino. If it's one thing I leave you with is that *todos somos gigantes*"

*Abigail*, could have chosen to deliver a different type of speech, but she opted to deliver a speech to her Latina/o student community, she wanted to tell incoming classes of Latina/o students that their journeys are not going to be easy. She spoke her truth and did not shy away from the difficulties she experienced. Moreover, *Abigail's* decision to conclude her speech using Spanish and not translate, highlights the importance she had toward preserving her language. Through her use of Spanish, she is embodying and owning her Latina/o identity on her terms. She is owning this in the context of a predominately white class, that she often felt uncomfortable in. Moreover, the space created and the relationship she had with her Latina teacher created a level of support and confidence to pursue something meaningful to her.

**Performing Style.** What we wear and what we carry do more than shield our bodies from the elements; they do more than hydrate us or help us carry our belongings. What we wear, and carry are ways we express ourselves, how we try to fit in our stand out. By examining what Latina/o youth wear and carry allows us to question the when, how, and why Latina/o youth engage in the stylistic performances that they do. This focus allows us to see how race, class, and gender intersect and inform the decisions Latina/o youth make. It would be a mistake to render youth's choices as trivial or to render simply as phases they are undergoing. The performances are fluid and informed by the people they interact with. Mimi Nguyen underscores the significance clothing plays. In her writing, she notes that what we wear has meaningful implications on how others see us. She argues that clothing is a way to mask elements of our identity as well as countering negative ascriptions that exclude. Nguyen (2015) writes, "Clothes are not merely ornamental; when we subtract them for the surface, we do not otherwise uncover the truth [...] but we find instead on such surfaces the optics through which someone is targeted

as alienable from others, and the lethal structures that disappear them – unwillingly, devastatingly – from our sight” (par. 9).

The fashion of Latina/o youth is part of their style, but so too are their interests in popular culture. With fashion, it was commonplace for me to make note of what student participants wore and to see how similar or varied it was for students at SHS. I asked student participants to talk to me about their fashion, specifically where they buy their clothing and where they get their inspiration.

**Gabriel:** Talk to me about your fashion style?

**Abigail:** I hate jeans (collective laughter) even though I wear them sometimes because I run out of my leggings because I have to wash them. I think I get my style from other girls here because I like their style. I’m not sporty even though I’m doing soccer. I’m not sporty.

**Gabriel:** Any stores in particular where you shop or get ideas?

**Abigail:** I like different types of stores. I shop at The Hills and I like it. I see the trends in the school sometimes I wear them too, not all of them. In the winter I wear sweaters and like now I’m wearing these shoes from Steve Madden. I wear a lot of black; I wear a lot of black. I love black.

**Gabriel:** Do you feel like you have a pretty unique style, or do you feel you blend in with the other students?

**Abigail:** Sometimes I do, sometimes I do not. Like from my friends like sometimes I think my friends have good style, sometimes they don’t. Sometimes I’m lazy and I’ll just wear pants and my UGGs or something.

*Abigail’s* response was no different than my observations of her fashion. In the two years that I shadowed her, I would categorize her as a stylish person. She did not dress like white female students; she did not wear some of the name brands that they would wear. Yet she would have her twist on them. One of the key fashion trends for white female students at SHS was to wear Lululemon clothing, yoga pants in particular. Yet, *Abigail* did not. Yes, she still wore leggings and yoga pants but that is more of a reflection of the fashion trend of the time and not an effort

assimilate into what white students are doing. Unlike *Abigail*, *Bob the Builder* has a different approach to how he dresses.

**Gabriel:** Tell me about your fashion style. How would you describe it?

**Bob the Builder:** Random! I just put on whatever I have at my house and I just walk.  
Gabriel: Is it typically jeans, t-shirts –

**Bob the Builder:** Well whatever I just have around. Like if I have sweatpants and I can't find anything else I'll just put sweatpants or just put on a random shirt.

**Gabriel:** Are there any stores or stores online that that you like to buy clothes from or that your parents go to?

**Bob the Builder:** We mostly just go to Target (chuckles) they don't go to big name brands like JC Penny or Old Navy.

*Bob the Builder* was honest in appraising his decision-making process as he put it, "Random!"

His style was not much different from other students in school. Most of the males at SHS wore jeans or sweat pants with some sort of t-shirt. But a distinction within and without the Latina/o student male body is that from a class perspective. *Bob the Builder* did not have the ability to afford more costly clothing. When I asked him about where he or his family shop, he remarked, "We mostly just go to Target (chuckles) they don't get to go to big name brands like JC Penny or Old Navy." Unlike *Abigail* who noted some major brands like Steve Madden or UGG, *Bob the Builder* noted different brands or stores that he considered high end. At SHS, it was apparent that while people did shop at the aforementioned places, that several students shopped elsewhere. Many of the males would shop at places like Nordstrom, Abercrombie and Fitch, J Crew, Urban Outfitters, or would wear brands like Patagonia or The North Face.

**Gabriel:** How would you describe your sense of fashion?

**Hannah:** I think I realized that now I try to be as casual as possible. In my earlier years I tried to look or dress similarly as all the other girls in my school and my grade. I think now it's very simple, very simple.

**Gabriel:** Where do you look to get new ideas, inspiration?

**Hannah:** For new ideas I use Instagram. I follow a lot of fashion accounts and then the mall, Glen Oak Mall.

**Gabriel:** Any stores you like in particular?

**Hannah:** I really like Francesca's. I think very classy (laughs). I'm obsessed with Gap. They have the greatest jeans and I think that's about it.

**Gabriel:** Do you think other students dress differently than you do?

**Hannah:** I think so. I think there are other fashionable girls that I stare at their outfits because they're nice or they're a good outfit. I think there are some people that dress very similarly, and you can't tell the difference.

**Gabriel:** So, what are some of the other fashion trends at the school?

**Hannah:** The black leggings with a sweatshirt and your UGGs. Or just black leggings with anything. I'm glad it's a trend because they're super comfortable, I can wear them everyday.

**Gabriel:** One of the things that I noticed is that certain girls tend to carry little Lululemon bags.

**Hannah:** I think someone started doing and it others said wow I guess I should too. My mom has one and I think I did use it once and brought it to school and it felt really uncomfortable because everyone else had one. I don't really shop there, but I think we found it in the cabinet with the rest of the bags in our house.

*Hannah* was a participant whose closest friends were white, and her fashion was in part informed by being with them. *Hannah* was more conscious about her fashion decisions. She was more specific in talking about her fashion. In talking about where she gets inspiration, unlike *Abigail* who at times relies on peers or *Bob the Builder* who relies on what is lying around, *Hannah* uses social media to get new ideas. Her use of Instagram is something that other students both Latina/o and white did at the high school. *Hannah* also added like *Abigail* that the main fashion trend at SHS is for female students to wear leggings. When talking about Lululemon, I asked *Hannah* to talk about the small Lululemon tote bags several white female students carry around

regularly. She spoke that she did so once but felt uncomfortable and how for her it was not that she had gone to shop there, but for some reason they had a bag lying around. Early on in the research process, I noticed that *Hannah* did have a small little tote bag herself. Yet hers was a display of a coffee bag design with a woman on it. To me this was a resistance, a refusal to acquiesce to the norm of the Lululemon and she was going to engage in a popular trend in school, but on her terms, based on her *identidad*<sup>35</sup>.

**Figure 11: Lululemon Bag**




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<sup>35</sup> Translation: Identity

**Figure 12: Hannah's Bag**



This was not atypical of Latina/o students in the school. The carrying of Lululemon bags on the part of white students and some Latina students is an expression of their class privilege. This privilege in turn has Latina/o students who do not possess that to spend money they may or may not have to keep up with appearances. Or for others to play with that notion like *Hannah* and do things on her terms, displaying her identity in ways that are authentic and meaningful to her.

Moreover, to continue the Lululemon theme, many of the white female students would wear yoga or leggings from that company, yet their prices are too steep for some Latina/o students to afford. *Lisette* at times would wear a light blue headband, in my view that was her way of trying to keep up. Yet you also saw numerous Latina students wear leggings, but from other places, other brands that allowed them to engage in the fashion norm at SHS, but in ways that they could afford.

### **“I Speak Spanglish y Que?” Understanding Performances of Language**

Students had finished reciting the pledge of allegiance and observed a moment of silent reflection when Mrs. Beatty then played the announcements for the day. The Biology Honors students, of whom all were white, with the exception of *Esther* and another Latino student, began

to talk amongst one another. *Esther*, as would become customary would walk into the room place her things on her desk and come talk to me. It was the first week of school, so we talked about our respective summers. She had told me she had gone on a college summer trip to a liberal arts college on the east coast. She did not appear enthused about her trip, when I asked her how she liked it, she responded with, “Eh.” Prompting a chuckle between the two of us. We continued talking, by directing our conversation about Latinos Unidos. After a few minutes, Mrs. Beatty asked for the class’s attention and then began to lead them in her lesson. As *Esther* opened her Chromebook to access her textbook, she turned toward me and showed me her desktop screen that read, “I Speak Spanglish. Y Que?” I smiled and quietly remarked, “That’s awesome!” and then proceeded to give a thumbs-up prompting us to chuckle. During my interview with her, I asked her to reflect back upon the exchange we had in her biology course.

**Gabriel:** In that class I also noticed that on your chromebook desktop you have, “I speak Spanglish y Que?”

**Esther:** (Chuckles)

**Gabriel:** Talk to me about why you have that and what it means to you?

**Esther:** I found it on the internet and I found it verrry relatable. I was like oh my god, I’m not the only one who thinks this way. So, I just keep it on my laptop because every time I open it I see it and laugh. It’s a reminder that I speak both languages, people should be bothered by it and because I had the experience in AP Psych, I had talked to Mrs. Beatty about the language barrier. With tests, I move slower and so because of my experience in the past Mrs. Beatty was fine with me having extra time. I needed time to manage things, it may seem like a struggle, but I’m more advanced than most students because I’m managing two languages, my mind is switching on and off. I found it quite beautiful because I can explain things in two languages.

The fieldwork data and interview data demonstrate a deep conviction for embracing two languages, *Esther*, spoke in detail about thinking in two languages and needed additional time in taking exams in her biology class. For her the quote spoke to her embracing this part of her identity, feeling comfortable and not backing down whenever things got tough for her. For other



students speaking Spanish was something they were less comfortable with at SHS. *Richard* spoke to that tension during our interview.

**Gabriel:** Talk to me about being a bilingual speak and do you feel like in the school context with your friends or with people at this school, do you think that it's difficult or easy to talk in Spanish?

**Richard:** So, I did grow up being bilingual. I was watching old videos of me and I actually spoke Spanish better than English and then towards when I was 6, 7 going into elementary school I started speaking more English and I moved to and then there's this class that was dual language and pure English. Surprisingly my mom gave me that decision and ever since I've just taken the English road. So, there was that huge gap when I just didn't speak Spanish so that separates me from the Latinos here cuz when I came to the high school I honestly didn't know much Spanish or how to speak it. I understood it, but to speak it was something challenging so I think people assumed that I was really good at Spanish or help me with your Spanish homework was kind of a struggle cuz its kind of hard telling them no I don't know that much because then they look down upon you and other Latinos look upon you greatly, they'll say like certain harsh things in Spanish, thinking I wouldn't understand that which is why I left certain groups, stop talking about me, *este chamaco no sabe hablar español* and I'm like bro I'm right here. That kind of stuff, assuming that I speak Spanish is kind of challenging, especially in stores, in school with some of the teachers I wouldn't say I fit.

For *Richard*, while he is proud of who he is, he is less comfortable engaging in Spanish. For him his language loss has come with experiences that have been painful, forcing him to enact an identity that is quiet farther removed from his peers who speak Spanish more comfortably. Yet Spanish is also used as an exclusionary tool as *Richard* noted how he was judged for supposedly not speaking Spanish. For others Spanish is a unifying force. For instance, in talking with

*Camilla:*

I feel like its nicer to speak Spanish in school just cuz something makes you even closer as friends just because you know that having a conversation with your Latino friend will always be more intimate than having a conversation with a white friend who doesn't have that connection. Like I was talking today with my friends in Spanish class today and it was nice. I feel like you're in a telenovela and you're just with your friends, it's fun, it's nice.

For *Camilla*, it was a way to connect, to embrace a part of her identity from home and incorporate it into her life at school. Her ability to have people around her to speak in her native

language allowed her to continue to practice, but also to engage an identity that was meaningful to her, not having to worry about what others thought.

### **Pensamientos Finales<sup>36</sup>**

Making sense of identity is a tricky enterprise. To understand it requires a willingness to unpack what we have deemed normal. It requires us to examine how identity functions within the groups we affiliate ourselves with and those on the outside. At SHS, attending a white school with affluence plays an enormous role shaping how Latina/o youth enact their identity. The youth of the study are an in-between space of being influenced by whiteness and their native ethno-racial culture. For example, despite being proud of her ethno-racial identity, *Lisette* would share in her interview, “Sometimes I have to change who I am in order to fit in. I’ve realized that I’ve changed stuff about me and I’m proud of who I am, but I’m I am why am I changing. Why do I keep stuff away from white culture?” All students embraced elements of whiteness, it is impossible not to, yet the identities they are born with, are often silenced or reworked because of the nature of the school. There are moments when you proudly claimed, embodied identities that white students did not understand, both those performances were left exclusively for their Latina/o peers, peers that while at times critically were willing to listen, to honor, to affirm their complexity.

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<sup>36</sup> Translation: Final Thoughts

## Chapter 6: Entre Nosotros y Entre Ellos:<sup>37</sup> How Latina/o Youth Build and Sustain Community at SHS

“America be looking like a party but no invitan<sup>38</sup> so we crashed the party and be like we brought fajitas. I beat, beat, beat up to Sonora Dinamita, threw a party on that torta be like girl I brought fajitas”

Chingo Bling, *Cerveza*

The confines of the typical American high school are composed of a series of hallways lined with lockers, adorned with school accomplishments, tattooed with messages about school pride, and riddled with flyers. These hallways serve as arteries helping students and school staff schlep from one room to another. Collectively these hallways help unite academic units as well as serve as bridges to other communal spaces such as the cafeteria, library, or gymnasium. While these basic physical features make up most of our high school imaginary, each school possesses unique features that help endear it to its occupants and SHS is no different. Yet, for whom are these endearing attributes salient? These attributes and spaces do not solely serve as bridges; they can also be barriers erected to demarcate boundaries of exclusion denying access and comfort to students. In his song, *Cerveza* Mexican American rapper Chingo Bling personifies the U.S. by describing it as a party. In this fictional party, “we,” meaning Latina/os are trying to enter, yet, because of who we are we are not let in. We enact our agency and as Bling puts it, “we crashed the party,” bringing the richness of our identities and cultural practices on our terms. Similarly, how do Latina/o youth “crash the party” at SHS? How do student participants forge different types of community throughout SHS in ways that do not adhere to the norms privileged by the white gaze?

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<sup>37</sup> Translation: Amongst ourselves and amongst them

<sup>38</sup> Translation: Invite

This chapter puts space and community into focus by examining how Latina/o youth at SHS build, navigate and make sense of it. Moreover, this chapter is particularly invested in understanding spaces dedicated to serving Latina/o youth along with spaces youth have created and sustained by their own will. By considering myriad ways Latina/o youth traverse SHS we can better understand the different types of community students have forged within and outside of their ethno-racial, gendered, classed, and linguistic identities. The proceeding pages will describe SHS and the spaces Latina/o youth occupy. Further, the analysis of this chapter will be devoted to how Latina/o youth experience and build community in spaces that are school sanctioned (e.g. clubs, sports) and in places at SHS that they have carved out for themselves (e.g. hallways).

### **A Separation: Context Toward Understanding Space at SHS**

To understand the academic and social spaces Latina/o youth use or do not it is important to highlight how these spaces are claimed and negotiated. Latina/o youth have real and perceived options when it comes to navigating their school. Moreover, space is not static, it varies. Like other schools, spaces also are ascribed labels, these labels have consequences as to how Latina/o youth make sense of SHS. During interviews with student participants, I asked them to describe their school. All participants first spoke about the academic rigor that exists and one of the themes that emerged was that Latina/o youth were aware of the opportunities that their school possesses.

**Gabriel:** How would you describe Shields High School?

**Mia:** As a school structure it's a big school, it has nice rooms. They try to fix it as much as they can. Educationally it's really good. The way they teach, the teachers know what they're doing and they're always trying to help you.

In her response, *Mia* not only points out the quality and proactive nature of her teachers, but also that the building itself has good upkeep. Indeed, in my time in the high school rarely did I see trash in hallways or in classrooms. While school security would at times hassle students to pick up after themselves, rarely did they create a mess that one would consider worthy of attention. Further, *Mia's* comment, “they try to fix it as much as they can” was illustrated in the year and half construction project the school undertook to tear down and rebuild an old portion of the school. School leadership communicated through various forums (e.g. school newsletter, staff meetings, interactions with students, newspaper reporting, etc.) that the project allowed the school to rebuild with 21<sup>st</sup> century education in mind. The school added classrooms with mobile furniture for collaboration, a new gymnasium, a computer science classroom with erasable whiteboards as walls, a photography studio with a dark room and green room, among other amenities. Further, other participants focused their response on their appreciation for the academic opportunities at SHS.

**Gabriel:** How would you describe Shields High School?

**Abigail:** Well I think there's a lot of opportunities at Shields. I love it even though it's difficult to come here, but I truly love it because I know that if I would have gone to a different high school my life would have been so much harder and difficult and I probably wouldn't have anything that I have now. So, I'm grateful to the school, the teachers and to how much opportunities they bring up to Latino students.

Similarly, when asked the same question, *Joaquín* commented, “It's a school where many opportunities are given to us (meaning Latina/o students) to achieve and I guess not many of us take advantage of them, but it's a school where teachers support and give you the opportunities. You get to participate a lot if you want to.” In both *Abigail's* and *Joaquín's* responses, you get a clear view that Shields has a lot of opportunities for Latina/o students to succeed. *Abigail's* response shows her appreciation for what she has received in her time at SHS. *Joaquín's*

response highlights important dimensions revolving around opportunity, meritocracy, and choice. The idea of students not taking advantage of opportunities shifts the focus onto students for being in control, while not considering the role the school plays. *Abigail's* comment while positive of the school also shows the duality of voicing critique. *Abigail* while grateful to be a student at SHS, also said, "I love it even though, it's difficult to come here." *Abigail's* commentary was something all participants voiced to varying degrees during their respective interviews. In my conversations with *Jacobo* we had spoken about the contradictions of diversity at SHS and we returned to it in my interview with him.

**Gabriel:** How would you describe Shields High School?

**Jacobo:** Shields, I think it's beautiful. Sort of like the thing you were saying Shields is full of contradictions. There's a lot of pride, there's a lot of heritage, there's a lot of diversity, a lot of opportunities.

In describing SHS, students complicated what it meant for them to be a student in the building.

*MacDaddy*, *Jackie*, *Lisette*, *Xóchitl*, and *Richard* for instance responded:

**Gabriel:** How would you describe Shields High School?

**MacDaddy:** How would I describe it? I think it's a nice place to go to school. But I think if you break it down you slowly start to realize that it's not.

**Gabriel:** Ok, so what are some of those issues or things that you-

**MacDaddy:** The way the school is broken up. Like the hallways, like you can clearly tell who sits where and why they sit there.

**Gabriel:** How would you describe Shields High School?

**Jackie:** I think it's a great school academically because for anyone they have so many different opportunities especially for Hispanics. We're lucky here because they give us so many opportunities to be successful not unlike other schools like Brookside<sup>39</sup>. They don't have the opportunities we have. So academically it's a great school for anyone to go to.

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<sup>39</sup> Brookside High School is minority majority school with a majority Latina/o student population. The school is in a nearby suburb that is not affluent and is a community that many families in Lakeview and Northwood commute to for visiting family and shopping.

But socially it's pretty diverse, but like there are different groups. People kind of stick with their own race. It's very (pause) I can't think of the word its separated I think by people who sit in the commons and then the people who are always in the lunch room or on the benches are the Hispanics and in the commons it's the white and Jewish people. So, in that way it's pretty separated.

*MacDaddy* and *Jackie* highlight the idea that they go to a good high school, but then go deeper by talking about how when looking more closely you see faults. Both participants noted the divisions between students, particularly in the hallways and in the cafeteria. The divisions in the cafeteria and in the hallways will be discussed in greater length later in the chapter, but I insert their commentary here as it is an important dynamic to have if one is to understand the holistic nature of the high school and how Latina/o students understand it. Racial segregation, or as student participants call it "separation" is discussed by *Lisette* and *Xóchitl*.

**Gabriel:** How would you describe Shields High School?

**Lisette:** White! Selfish, ignorant, I mean there's both positives and negatives, community is a positive.

**Gabriel:** What do you mean by community?

**Lisette:** Like I feel like Shields High School tries to, like Pledge Month, they try to come in as a community, but at the same time there's still people that aren't being part of it. I mean the people who sell goodies like are all white people, there are no Latinos. I feel like Latinos don't take part in that.

**Gabriel:** Any reason why?

**Lisette:** I mean we buy stuff, I don't think we feel integrated. When I think of SHS I think of a white community. It's like the white people taking charge.

**Gabriel:** Do you think that they're aware of that?

**Lisette:** I don't think so. I hear them say our school is diverse, it's a mix of Latino and white people and yeah there's a mix, but who are the ones that are in charge? It's all white people. If you think of the student body, the student president, the student council is all white people, there's only one *Liliana*.

**Gabriel:** What about socially, how would you describe the social scene at Shields?

**Xóchitl:** Terrible.

**Gabriel:** Why is it terrible?

**Xóchitl:** Like when you're with your Mexican friends some white people don't acknowledge you when you're in the hallways and you see someone that you know and it's like they're with their white friends and they don't see you but when you're playing sports they know you're there and they start talking to you differently than when they talk to you outside of sports.

**Gabriel:** Does it bother you?

**Xóchitl:** Yeah! At times, it does, but it's the way people are.

**Gabriel:** Is that something that you were expecting or not expecting when you came to Shields?

**Xóchitl:** Yeah, I did volleyball and soccer at Maple Lane as well and everywhere you went all your teammates would say hi to you, but here it's different like they know you're there, but they don't say hi to you so it's totally different.

**Gabriel:** How would you describe Shields High School?

**Richard:** Isolated. Aggressive school academically. Somewhat preppy and I don't know I can't think of adjective, but it's not a very comfortable area to be in. You don't feel like you necessarily belong.

Both *Lisette* and *Xóchitl* focus their responses on whiteness by talking about how their actions impact them socially. By not being spoken to in the hallways *Xóchitl* is aware of when white students want to engage and for what purpose. Further, *Lisette*, when talking about community, she notes how community exists, but it's one that is white. While not explicit, her commentary about Latina/o students not taking part in school initiatives was not because students did not want to engage, in fact they would purchase things, but given that white students control things, it makes it difficult for Latina/o students to feel a sense of belonging. Finally, *Richard's* comment spoke to a lack of belonging and offered one of the strongest rebukes of the academic nature of the school, moreover, his use of "preppy" to me was coded as white feeding to his discomfort.



Cumulatively, the five responses espouse a strong critique centered on racial segregation, the role white students played in making Latina/o students feel uncomfortable and detached leading to these students to not feel part of the mainstream fabric of SHS. The student participants are not only aware of these dynamics, but are wrestling with the dualities, the contradictions of appreciating what is available with the realities that make taking advantage of opportunity a lot more difficult than one might think. Participants discussed some of the underlying issues why they think these contextual issues exist.

**Gabriel:** How would you describe Shields High School?

**Hannah:** It's a lovely, lovely school. I think it's still has some work to do racially wise with students. It's definitely a lot better than other schools. I helped interview principals and I think I realized that compared to Elkview<sup>40</sup> who's in our own district, they're very different from us.

**Gabriel:** What more do you think the school could do?

**Hannah:** Well, I don't know what we can do because it's hard to get students to be with other students and if they already have these cliques, but I think the way it is, the first thing that comes to mind is that is just the lunch room and how its sooo segregated. I think that's the first thing that comes to mind when I think of Shields. But then there's also, my friends and that's somewhat racially diverse.

**Gabriel:** How do you think Latino students would describe the school?

**Hannah:** I think there's always that uncomfortableness and I think they still feel that and it's hard to let go of that. I don't know how to change that, but it's always there.

**Gabriel:** Do you feel that way sometimes?

**Hannah:** Yeah, I definitely do like in Key Club. There's no Latino students, maybe one other. Especially freshman year there wasn't anyone and I felt super uncomfortable.

**Gabriel:** What made that experience or others uncomfortable?

**Hannah:** I think it's just that you're, I think seeing another Latino student there's that connection. I think not having anyone there or my friends I was completely by myself.

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<sup>40</sup> Elkview High School is a majority white school with a much smaller Latina/o population. The high school is located next to Lakeview and are rivals with SHS.

*Hannah's* experiences in Key Club are insightful, highlighting the importance having friends and having people who look like you play in creating and sustaining safe spaces for Latina/o youth.

Yet, despite these difficulties, *Hannah* persisted with Key Club and remained active in extracurricular activities during her time at SHS. Other students in the study spoke about leaving a club after going alone or feeling unwelcomed. Several of the student participants talked about a separation existing within SHS. *Jacobo* and *Michelle* provided some of the strongest insight during their interviews. *Michelle*, in describing SHS said, “We are diverse, but very segregated.”

**Gabriel:** Would you describe the school as diverse?

**Michelle:** I think it is, there's so many people with different personalities and cultures, but I think it's really segregated. I think we have a really good education and the teachers are really, really helpful, but I don't think the diversity isn't a good thing here. It's good that its diverse, but bad because it's so segregated.

While school and state data show that the school racially is not as diverse as *Michelle* or other students may think, it is important to note that *Michelle* is looking at diversity based on her lived experiences of growing up in the communities that send students to SHS. For her growing up in (town) afforded her interactions with mainly white and Latina/o people. Additionally, *Michelle* is also offering a more nuanced understanding of diversity by also factoring people's personalities. *Jacobo*, goes deeper in his response.

That's the part of the thing I have a hard time dealing with in Shields. It's like we sort of acknowledge that our school is diverse, but I don't think we really embrace it. Yeah, our school is diverse, but then you go into the commons and it's all white. You go to the cafeteria and this side is all Mexicans, one side is all Latinos, and then you see the benches and these types of groups are there like for example certain groups socialize with each other. As I said whites with whites and then we have English Learners students they don't hang with us. We hang out with people from our school, yes there's pride, there's diversity, but it's so segregated.

Further, the diversity within the Latina/o community is another factor to consider.

**Abigail:** Well, there's definitely clicks everywhere, and everyone's separated. People try to come together, but I feel like that doesn't happen. There's a group for black kids, a

group of Mexicans, but there's many groups of Mexicans and many groups of white kids. So not every Mexicans and not all white kids hangout.

Another factor worth noting is what *Joaquín* brings up

**Joaquín:** Just for comfort I think. We've been growing up most of the time, we know each other. Middle schools split us up also. If you go to Edgewood is mostly white and Northwood is mainly Mexican, and Elm Place is like a mix.

All the student participants went through the K-8 school district in the community and have been together since attending school. Interestingly enough, many of the Latina/o students hail from the same region within Mexico and are related to one another. These factors cannot be ignored in understanding groups within the student body. Moreover, not every single Latina/o is Mexican, a significant but small portion are Central American. Further, within the entire Latina/o student body, different social cliques exist which fuel some of the separation within the Latina/o community.

Separation was a key theme from the contextual question I asked student participants about SHS. While their responses varied, all alluded to separation existing between themselves and white students. Moreover, this separation has created a school community that *Jacobo* and *Michelle* highlighted is diverse but segregated. In the coming sections, I continue to show the segregated nature of SHS and the ways Latina/o make use of space and forge community.

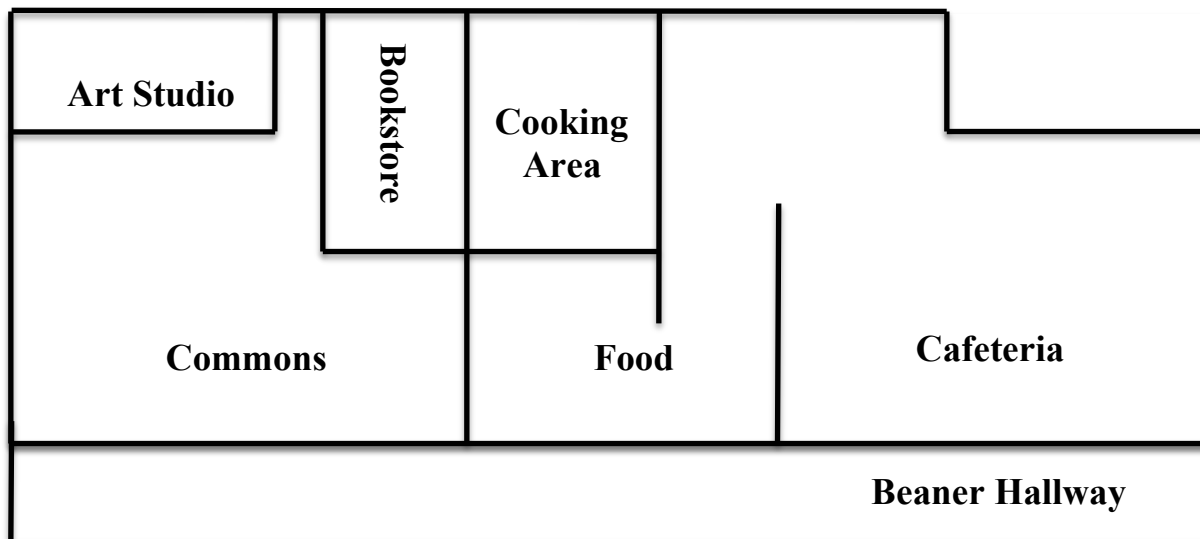
### **Unstructured Spaces**

#### **The Commons, The Cafeteria, and the Beaner Hallway**

To get a sense of the social dynamics at SHS, I made it a point to check out the school's cafeteria. I felt that this space would be one that would allow me to see interactions within and between different cliques of students. I was curious to see how Latina/o youth interacted with one another and with other peers in unstructured spaces. At SHS, students are free to eat lunch

wherever they would like in the building, but most students opted to eat in the student cafeteria and what students and staff called “the commons.”

**Figure 13: Map of Commons and Cafeteria**



Walking down the hallway linking the commons and the cafeteria, I noticed racial boundaries; different types of students sitting with one another in the hallway, in the commons, and in the cafeteria. It quickly became apparent where many of the Latina/o students at SHS sat, and it became clearer how much space white students took up. Similarly, according Tatum’s (2003) research on Black youth, some staff and students wanted to know why the Latina/o students sat together. They wanted to know why they quartered themselves off from everyone else, but, as Tatum posits, school staff rarely comment about where and why white students sit together (p. 52). The decisions of Latina/o students are not fully understood by some white students and educators and, at times, are subject to critique for self-segregating. As Villalpando (2003) notes, “their decisions are viewed to have negative outcomes on behavior, learning, and values” (p. 619), while they should, according to the author, be more appropriately viewed as an act of self-

preservation. To me it made more sense to ask why white students were not sitting with Latina/o students. Why is it the responsibility of Latina/o youth to acquiesce to white students? What about their use of space was problematic?

The commons and the cafeteria were separated by the cooking and food rooms. Meaning that if a student wanted to go to either space, they would need to use the hallway. Yet, students who ate their lunches in the commons infrequently bought school lunches, most would bring food prepared at home or sometimes they would have a parent drop off food from a local restaurant. The students who occupied the commons were as *Abigail* put it, “All white seniors or juniors.” But what type of white upperclassman ate lunch in the commons? Participants in unison spoke about the commons being a place where popular white students ate their lunch. *J. Cole* and *MacDaddy* offered further detail:

**Gabriel:** Tell me about the commons, how would you describe?

**J. Cole:** The commons are typically where the popular upperclassmen will sit and then right outside the commons is typically I think I heard a name for that area that was white girl walk cuz the majority of the people who sit there are white girl students.

**Gabriel:** What type of white student sits in the commons?

**MacDaddy:** The Jewish white person with money, that her or his parents went to college. While not every single person who sits in the commons is Jewish or comes from money, the commons has that ascription given to it, it speaks to the power *MacDaddy* believes white Jewish students have at SHS. Moreover, Latina/o students rarely if ever ate their lunch in the commons. Student participants spoke about the discomfort they felt when they walked by or had to go into the commons. For instance, *Xóchitl* when asked to describe the commons responded with:

**Xóchitl:** Oh my god. All the white people are there there's no Mexicans or Blacks. It's just white. When you come in, they're all staring at you like why are you here? It's really uncomfortable.

*Hannah* spoke about the discomfort she experienced when having to go to the school's bookstore:

**Gabriel:** Tell me about the commons, how would you describe it?

**Hannah:** Very intimidating. We have to go in there to go to the bookstore and I hate going in there. It's very white dominated, it's all the classic athletics, the jocks and white seniors.

**Gabriel:** What makes that experience intimidating?

**Hannah:** I think it's that you know, that I know that it's very exclusive, the exclusiveness of it is very intimidating.

*Xóchitl* and *Hannah* highlight the high degree of intimidation and discomfort they feel.

Moreover, for *Hannah* the exclusive nature that the commons lead the less popular students to feel unworthy. In talking with participants, many of them spoke about how they technically could go and sit there, and indeed some had done so in the past to see what would happen. They would tell me that they would just get looked at, stared at, and asked what they were doing there. The impact of the commons was also felt in the hallway.

**Gabriel:** Who sits in the commons?

**Joaquín:** White people cuz from what I've heard popular people. I don't go in there and try to walk as fast as I can.

**Gabriel:** Any reason why you don't walk by there or go in?

**Joaquín:** It feels uncomfortable. They sit in the hallway and they're probably looking and judging.

For *Joaquín*, walking by as quickly as possible spoke to his level of discomfort that white students impose regardless of what they were doing. As students walk by the commons, they also need to contend with the white female students *J. Cole* referenced. In this brief stretch of hallway, Latina/o students are thrust into another white space, a space where they feel and know they are not welcomed. It is not until they make it to the other side of the hallway where they receive some respite, at least for some Latina/o students.

Before entering the cafeteria, there are a set of benches that feature mainly Latina/o students. Known officially as the “benches,” the unofficial name and one that is most used by Latina/o students is “the beaner hallway” or what is at times called the “jalapeño hallway.” In wanting to know more about who sat on the benches, I spent time walking by and sitting nearby to get a sense. In my interviews with participants, they confirmed many of my observations. When I asked participants, who sat on the benches, many responded that it was freshmen and sophomores:

**Gabriel:** Who sits on the benches?

**Sofia:** Freshman year I would sit on the benches, sometimes the ELL kids sit toward the end of them. It has changed, it used to be pure Latinos, but now you see 3 non-Latinos. Sometimes the Latinos that think they’re cool sit there and sometimes they make fun of the ELL kids.

**Gabriel:** Tell me about the benches. The commons like you said is very white, the cafeteria is a little bit more diverse and the benches are primarily Latino.

**Richard:** Mainly freshmen and sophomores and a little bit of juniors.

**Gabriel:** Does it matter what type of Latino student sits there. I’d imagine there are students more studious than others; do they also sit there?

**Richard:** The most studious kids usually don’t sit there. Usually the ones that, I don’t know, but from what all I know they consistently play basketball with the trashcans outside. They’re underclassmen, they’re being little kids.

**Gabriel:** Who sits on the benches?

**Mia:** When I was a freshman, the juniors and seniors were more like I don’t want to say ghetto, cuz nobody’s ghetto here but like more trying to be more street or trying to front something. That seems weird because its Shields because it’s safe and white culture.

**Gabriel:** So, what were some of the things -

**Mia:** They would hang around - where all the Hispanics sit in the hallway which now is mainly freshmen that sit there, but before it’d be them and it would be awkward, and they would stare at you.

**Gabriel:** So how would you describe the people who sit at the benches?

**Abigail:** Its cuz I really don't talk to them, so I don't want to say anything bad about them. Since I see them in some of my classes they don't really try hard. I don't know (pause) I feel like they since I went to Frontier with most of them. I just don't talk to them since we grew out of different mentalities. I feel like if I'm friends with them it's because you want to be friends with someone that will help you and you'll help them. I feel like they won't help me in anyway. They'll make me get ahead of my path because I know some are not on very good steps. It's kind of sad because I want our Latinos to go to college and I'm not saying that they're not but they have to try harder. I feel like some of the kids are really good. I know my cousins and they're very studious, but some of them don't. It's kind of a mixture of trouble makers and non-trouble makers.

*Sofia, Mia, and Abigail* spoke about how freshman and sophomores sit on the benches. *Sofia* noted how some of the students at times make fun of students in the English Language Learner program in the building. *Mia*, highlights how spaces can evolve by discussing how the benches used to be a space occupied by Latina/o junior and seniors. *Mia* and *Abigail*, both mention that the benches are a space where students as *Mia* puts it are trying to, "front something." *Abigail*, as she believes thinks many of the students at the benches, "grew out of different mentalities," ultimately leading her not to want to be associated with those students. Yet, both *Mia* and *Abigail* are also wrestling with how to make sense of the students who sit at the benches. Both are hesitant to completely write off those who sit there. *Mia* said, "[...] like I don't want to say ghetto, cuz nobody's ghetto here [...]" yet the idea of "ghetto" is something that is ascribed onto certain Latina/o students. *Abigail*, struggles in how to talk about the students at the benches, as she noted, "I don't want to say anything bad about them," yet she still had something critical to say, she noted she wants them to go to college, but she believes they need to try harder, she believes that some of the students are "really good." We are left to look at these responses as outcomes of systems of meritocracy along with how we imagine urban spaces or schools.

*Abigail*, is a student who is proud of her Mexican identity, has strong connections to Mexico and her language, she is also a student who has been rewarded by a schooling system for her efforts



and compliance. She has become aware of who is able to be accepted within the confines of SHS. The label that is given to students is summed up best by *J. Cole* when I asked him to describe the Latina/o students who sit on the benches.

**J. Cole:** I don't know, more of a stereotypical Latino student where the idea is that Mexicans are lazy, they don't want to do much. That's the biggest notion that gets passed around.

The implications of being labeled as lazy, or to put it bluntly, to be labeled as someone who sits on the benches has immense implications for how Latina/o students at large are viewed by the larger white student population. For students who do not sit at the benches, they want to be as far removed from that context as possible because they do not want to be labeled as “ghetto” as someone who is a “stereotypical Latino student.” *Jacobo* talks about some of these implications in his response.

**Jacobo:** We used to sit there, well sometimes I sat there. I think people have a, people from the inside have a negative perception about the people on the outside, and sometimes us within our own criticize our own. They have this idea, particularly what I heard people who sit on the benches are called beaners, people who sit there are people who either are not intelligent or don't have a future. That's what I heard, if you sit on the bench you're done. You're a Mexican, Mexican, that's what I heard; I don't think it's true either. They're definitely criticized more than the other groups.

*Jacobo* offers a powerful response, a damning statement of what is at stake for Latina/o students at SHS. As he said, “[...] if you sit on the benches you're done.” While he does not subscribe to this notion, as he noted he does not believe it is true, *Jacobo* like other student participants know what is said about students at the benches, in some way it is a repudiation of them as well. Student participants also talked about shying away or feeling uncomfortable when walking by the benches during non-lunch times. *Abigail* spoke about her apprehension when walking by the benches. She said:

**Abigail:** Even when I walked down the beaner hall in the morning, I hate it, I hate it so much. Even though I'm Mexican because I don't really talk to them. It's intimidating so I go the long way by the senior hall.

*Liliana* also spoke critically of this space during my interview with her: “Freshman year I avoided the cafeteria by all means. You couldn't pay me to go in there cuz there was this idea that I was like better than others because I went to Woodland.<sup>41</sup> Hispanics like Luis and Simón were mean so I just avoided them. The expectations that you'll be judged or bullied by whites didn't happen, I found it was Hispanics vs. Hispanics.” In my interview with *Liliana*, a senior, she spoke about her discomfort of hanging out by the cafeteria her freshman year. Her negative experiences with Luis and Simón who attended Frontier led her to hangout and eat lunch elsewhere. Additionally, attending Woodland and interacting with its large white population appears to have also shaped her perceptions of white students and her willingness to interact with them. In the interview, *Liliana* spoke that she would eat lunch in the commons, The Learning Center, and by her senior year she would eat at the College Resource Center<sup>42</sup>.

Just as some Latina/o youth at SHS note how the benches are for “troublemakers” white students too seem to feel this and carry these perceptions in homogenizing ways. In talking with *MacDaddy*, he would say:

**MacDaddy:** I think um also White students they need to be more open cause you see when for Pledge Drive right now there are people selling things like right away, White

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<sup>41</sup> Each middle school is unique, with varying racial demographics. Woodland is located in an upper-middle class part of town, 88% of its students are white population while 7% are Latina/o. Maple Lane also located in an upper-middle class part of Lakeview has a white population constituting 82% and its Latina/o population is 12%. The third middle school, Frontier has the largest Latino population. Its population stands at 41% with its white population at 52%. Preliminary findings indicate that attending these middle schools produce different experiences, thus shaping their time at SHS.

<sup>42</sup> The Learning Center is a room open during the school day where students can come in to complete schoolwork or receive tutoring from peers or teachers. The College Resource Center is open during the school day as well and is available to students to do research for college and scholarship applications.

students they right away they go to the Commons or they go to the cafeteria, but they go where there's White students. But if no one buys anything there, they walk to us like if we're gonna stab them or something. They walk over like really scared.

### *School Sanctioned Spaces*

This section is divided into three categories; academic, extracurricular, and socio-emotional. The first section primarily focuses on college access programs and courses SHS has in place. While not all these spaces are exclusively for Latina/o youth, they are analyzed because these are spaces and opportunities Latina/o youth traverse or are expected to make use of. The second section delves into the role clubs, sports, and fine arts play in building a sense of community. The third section, examines the varied efforts SHS' counseling department has in place to support the socio-emotional well-being of its Latina/o students.

#### **Academic**

**Greenberg Achievers Program.** Founded by a wealthy corporate executive, the Greenberg Achievers Program is in place in several high schools in the Chicagoland area. The program has the explicit mission of supporting high achieving and motivated students from underrepresented backgrounds gain access to and succeed at select liberal arts colleges and universities. The Greenberg Achievers come from low-income families, are first generation college bound, and/or are students of color. The program believes that if high achieving students are to excel in top colleges and universities they must be motivated, have access to academic and enrichment programs, be knowledgeable about their college options, and obtain financial aid. Students in the program are nominated in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade and encouraged to apply. If students are interested in applying, they are asked to attend student and family sessions where they learn more about the program and receive an application. If students make it past the review process,

they and their parents are asked to interview. If a student is not accepted, they can re-apply after their freshman year.

A partnership with the AmeriCorps program brings recent college graduates from liberal arts colleges and universities to serve as the program's mentors. At each high school they partner with, Greenberg attempts to place four program mentors. These mentors work with students in the program for one to two years and each mentor is assigned a caseload of students. Mentors are responsible for supporting them academically by guiding them through one-on-one tutoring, leading academic, cultural, and socio-emotional workshops, and enrichment opportunities (e.g. field trips). Field trips varied, they related to community service, fine art performances (e.g. dance, theater), museums, STEM related exposures, outdoor activities, civics, and going on college trips. Over the two years of my study, six mentors worked with students. Of the six mentors, five identified as white (2 male, 3 female) and one identified as Latina. Further, the program also had three full-time staff who oversaw the program's financial aid and educational programming. Of these staff members, all identified as female, with two identifying as white and one as Latina.

Upon entering the Greenberg room, you are greeted by a large banner hanging outside of the door. Inside, the walls are lined with banners from elite liberal arts schools like Amherst, Bard, Bowdon, Carlton, Kenyon, Pomona, and Wellesley along with other elite private schools like Boston College or Tufts. Also, on the walls, were messages about grit, open-mindedness, and being an active learner. Bulletin boards in the room spotlighted mentor and student personal backgrounds and accomplishments. Throughout the room, Greenberg Achiever paraphernalia was everywhere ranging from backpacks, water bottles, t-shirts, to school supplies. There were four desks where the program mentors sat, and larger round tables used for group activities and

for students to hangout. A portion of the room had IKEA style furniture for students to relax in. The space had a small library and various board and card games. On any day, you could find students meeting with a Greenberg mentor, going over homework, playing a board game, or eating their lunch.

The students in the program at SHS are mainly Latina/o, but Greenberg also has a small number of Asian, Black, and white students. Nine participants either were in the program or left the program during their senior year (*Esther, Lissette, Camilla, Jackie, J. Cole, Richard, Liliana, and Michelle*). Of the nine, *Liliana* and *Jackie* left the program after deciding to not apply or attend Greenberg approved schools. The students' decision to leave the program will be discussed later in this section. During interviews with participants, each student shared their views of the program and the impact it has had on them.

Collectively, student participants in Greenberg talked about how difficult the program was for them. Not only did students worry about completing their assignments for class, tending to their extracurricular activities, going to work, and fulfilling family responsibilities, but they also had to make sure they completed academic assignments given to them by their mentors, participate in program workshops, and attend field trips. For instance, *J. Cole* spoke about the pressure he received from the program:

**Gabriel:** Tell me about Greenberg Achievers, how has that experience been for you so far?

**J Cole:** It's definitely been a lot of work over these 4 years. A lot of reminders and on more than one occasion feeling like they're being constantly over my shoulder, telling me I got to do this, I gotta do that, and it's like if I don't, then I might get kicked out for a reason because Greenberg has very strict guidelines to stay in the program. Now that I'm basically done, I'm in college, I know where I'm going, it's all come together, and they knew why I had to do all those things, even though they were hounding my ass about doing certain things, it was all meant for a better purpose.

*J. Cole* felt mentors and staff as he put it, “were hounding my ass about doing certain things [...]” Yet, despite the pressure he felt, *J. Cole* also was appreciative knowing that their efforts had paid off, as he put it Greenberg’s efforts were, “all meant for a better purpose.” During the first year of my study, *J. Cole* was a senior and decided to enroll at a liberal arts school in North Carolina. Yet, the extent that students are pushed to excel raised a question about the merits and the methods of how they were pushed and motivated. *J. Cole* was not the only participant to voice concern about Greenberg’s practices. *Michelle* commented:

**Gabriel:** How has Greenberg been for you?

**Michelle:** It’s been really difficult, but it’s been really rewarding. It’s been sooo challenging because they kind of not force, but they don’t let you take easy classes, which is good. Going into these classes that I didn’t think I would take or do well, but they’d put me in these classes, but yeah its helped me grow as a person and as a student.

**Gabriel:** Are there things you think they struggle in?

**Michelle:** Yeah, they’re very strict about some stuff and I feel like they could be understanding toward students. We would butt heads with last year’s coaches because they would want to be our friends, but then they act as authority figures. You can’t be an authority figure and then act close and it was hard for us and the coaches aren’t allowed to be friends towards you and I think that’s bad, I don’t know, why they can’t be close to us, why we can’t talk to them about things.

*Michelle*, like *J. Cole* noted the benefits of being pushed, she was particularly appreciative of having to be in upper level classes, which allowed her to see herself on par with her mainly white peers. When I asked *Michelle* and *J. Cole* if the program struggled with anything, both noted the strictness of the program. This rigidity also extended in her view to the relationships she had with the program’s mentors. In my informal conversations with Greenberg achievers, many of them voiced displeasure with the cohort of mentors that they worked with prior to my arrival.

During our interview, *Liliana* voiced her critique of these mentors:

**Liliana:** I don’t like how they work professionally. On trips, they had mentors who weren’t always trained well. They were doing work at their convenience. Greenberg can

at times not be a welcoming place, they gossip, I see them as immature and not professional. I'd rather go to my actual counselor.

*Liliana's* indictment of these mentors is evidence of the important role they play in creating a space that they feel comfortable navigating in. For *Liliana*, the Greenberg room was one in which she did not navigate much in and preferred bypassing her mentors for advice for her "actual counselor." Additionally, *Michelle* felt that the program mentors were not balancing their authority correctly. In her view, she desired the mentors to be friendlier, yet because they were not allowed to, it made it difficult for her to talk to them. At the start of my fieldwork, Greenberg had two remaining mentors and had hired two more. These two new mentors would come to be admired and respected among students for their dedication and willingness to advocate, listen, and to create culturally relevant programming for the students they worked with. Yet, despite having mentors who were supportive, students often had to contend against program policies. Later in our interview, *Michelle* spoke in greater detail about the fear of being pushed out from the program:

**Michelle:** You have to earn a certain GPA and have the grades to stay in Greenberg and if you get anything lower than a C, I don't like that if you're doing bad, they don't really help you, they push you away. If you're doing bad, they let you go. Probation is a bad thing, they just see as it as C's are bad, but it's hard when you're getting A and you're like, "Oh man am I going to stay in Greenberg?" Especially when you're an upperclassman and it's like what I am going to do? Where am I going to go to college? It puts sooo much pressure.

*Michelle's* critical commentary on the program's probation policy was in line with what other participants in Greenberg felt. In her view, rather than being supported when a student struggles, "they (Greenberg) push you away. If you're doing bad, they let you go. Probation is a bad thing [...]" *Liliana* also discussed probation:

**Gabriel:** Can you talk about your experiences with the Greenberg Achievers?

**Liliana:** I was on probation for getting 2 C's and we eventually agreed to part ways because I was no longer interested in Greenberg schools.

All students in the program were aware of the probation policy, it had a strong influence on their academic and socio-emotional well-being. As *Michelle* commented you are asking yourself, “Oh man am I going to stay in Greenberg?” This issue was particularly alarming given that students felt like they were not supported, in fact they felt pushed out. What sort of message are students receiving when they are placed on probation? What impact does it have on them given that many of these students who are in upper level classes with majority white students already feel like they do not belong? Not to mention that from a social perspective, many do not feel attached to the larger fabric of SHS.

During the second year of my study, I attended Greenberg's Induction Ceremony for their new incoming class of achievers. I include this portion of my fieldnotes because it made me think of what messages were being conveyed to students and the realities they had to face. The ceremony took place after school in the school's auditorium. I arrived early and was seeing Greenberg staff finish settings things up. The program's director and SHS's principal welcomed parents and their children. The school's principal spoke to these incoming students and referred to them as “superstars,” highlighting the importance of the power they possess, and the idea of success being attached to grit. Ms. Mullins, the program director returned onto the stage and spoke to the audience about the highly selective process of Greenberg. She challenged inductees to get out of their comfort zones by thinking and trying more and underscored the importance of supporting them throughout their time in Greenberg. Seniors in Greenberg came onto the stage and told their “Greenberg Stories.” Students were asked to dress in business casual clothing and each student highlighted their successes and what they got out of being in the program. *Michelle* and a female Asian student gave a brief speech and mentioned that the program was challenging,



but they would receive opportunities and benefits they would not get if not in the program.

During the speech *Michelle*, would translate into Spanish. Each senior then was asked to come to the stage and talk about why they were a Greenberg Achiever.

**Michelle:** “I want to make my parents proud and follow my dreams.”

**J. Cole:** “I want to push myself and achieve all of my dreams that are out of reach.”

**Richard:** “I want to give myself a chance at success.”

**Camilla:** “I like challenges and like to push myself to be better.”

Yet, through conversations with students, I knew that something was not being said. A sad reality was not being acknowledged that several of the students being accepted that day, would not make it to their senior year. While pessimistic, previous cohorts of accepted students were no longer in the program. Based on observations, interactions with program mentors and students, three primary factors led to the program’s issues with retention. The first as has been written about is the program’s probation policy and the second being the program’s emphasis on students attending liberal arts schools, and the third is its deficit-based practices. *Liliana* left the program in part because of the program’s probation policy, but mainly because she did not want to attend a small school. She would end up attending a large university in Illinois. *Jackie*, another student who left the program spoke about why she left the program:

**Gabriel:** How has your experience been being in Greenberg?

**Jackie:** It’s been great, but now it’s like I know where I want to go and it’s not a Greenberg school unfortunately, so I’m gonna have to like, I don’t want to quit Greenberg because it is a tough program and I’ve been in it and dealt with it for 4 years, but there really is no point in me staying if they’re not going to give me money, but I mean it’s been great, I got a lot of opportunities. I went to Penn the summer before my junior year, which was the best thing ever because I got to meet people from all around the world. We’ve gone on different experiences some were kinda boring like operas, I feel asleep in one (laughs). It’s given me a lot of different opportunities.

**Gabriel:** Have there been things in Greenberg that you haven’t liked?

**Jackie:** Yeah (pause) like going, when we went on our college visits last year, it was fun seeing all the campuses, but that's when I started to realizing liberal arts colleges weren't for me so I think that just the thing about Greenberg that I don't like that it's just liberal arts schools, but I get why they don't want to, because bigger schools are harder to get help from.

While acknowledging all the good that has come from her time in Greenberg, *Jackie* ultimately concluded after her college trips that liberal arts schools were not for her. She had no real reason for leaving the program, as she put it, "I don't want to quit Greenberg because it is a tough program and I've been in it and dealt with it for 4 years, but there really is no point in me staying if they're not going to give me money." While the policy was never fully made clear to me, students felt the policy was clear that if you do not apply to Greenberg approved schools you need to leave the program. This leaves students having to scramble for new support systems. To return to Ms. Mullins commentary about supporting students, what does it mean then for students to then lose that support if they decide that liberal arts schools are not for them?

The third factor impacting the program's retention is Greenberg's deficit-based approach.

**Gabriel:** Tell me about Greenberg Achievers, I'm curious to learn about your experiences?

**Richard:** If you were to ask me as a freshman, I would tell you a very different answer during the beginning. During the first 2 years I HATED the program, very demanding, it's like me, me, me, doesn't matter. Greenberg's first. I almost got in trouble when they said you're a Greenberg Scholar. I said, "I'm more than that." And I still believe in that and I almost got in trouble. Greenberg is not, I'm not just a representative of Greenberg, it's a part of my life, but they make it seem like Greenberg is everything. I've always seen that they care about their image soooo much. We'll take the AP test scores to see trends and we'll go to exposures and training, not necessarily to learn, but to be at a higher standard. So, when people see us they say, "Oh you're the Greenberg kids, we've heard a lot about you." Most Greenberg coaches are white, so it makes it harder to relate and they may slightly understand, but not fully. It's hard to relate. Greenberg, I'm not going to say it's a bad program, because I'm definitely going to a good school, they help me with exposures, going to summer programs, they do a lot. Sometimes they push their underclassman a lot.

**Gabriel:** What changed for you?

**Richard:** They backed off. Seniors don't have those reading programs, those were annoying. I would have to do more homework that wasn't necessary in my eyes. We would be going over something that has nothing to do with my class. If we didn't do the work, we would be in trouble. I didn't need the work they gave me early on, it didn't impact me that much, but they love doing it.

**Gabriel:** Do you think the program is open to feedback?

**Richard:** They've never asked for it, ever. So, I wouldn't say so. The program doesn't understand the importance of our culture. It's like asking for help, we went on a camp trip and I had to ask for help and they said you gotta ask for help and I understood, and it was hard for me, it wasn't going to click and over the years I'm like whatever. They think that if they say it once it's going to change, but it's not that easy.

*Richard* touches upon several issues during our interview. The first in his view is the program's image. *Richard* struggled early on with the program attempting to promote a Greenberg identity. As he stated, "I'm more than that. I still believe in that and I almost got in trouble. I'm not just a representative of Greenberg, it's a part of my life, but they make it seem like Greenberg is everything. I've always seen that they care about their image soooo much." As he would go on to say he felt that they did things not only for benefit of students, but for the prestige of the program. Greenberg had a reputation within SHS that students had to live up to, for Latina/o students it was a reputation that you are the best of the best. Students would come to forge community amongst themselves, at times hanging out and supporting one another. During the second year of the study, students received Greenberg Achiever backpacks, the program's founder wanted each student to receive and use them. Yet, if a student left the program they were asked to return the back. What does this say about the Greenberg Achiever family, what it says is that you are one of us, until you are not. Further, *Richard* and other students voiced frustration over the program not understanding them, feeling disconnect from their mainly white mentors. Students like *Richard* who were upperclassman often tended not to use the Greenberg room as much as some of the underclassman who had to come more often to work with their mentors.

These criticisms and observations made by Greenberg Achiever students were not only held by them, but also the newly hired mentors who quickly became aware of the program's deficit approaches. Their efforts to push back were often met with resistance from the program's founder and central staff. Yet, they created programming that offered safe spaces for Latina/o youth to be themselves and share their views in academically challenging, but in culturally relevant ways.

One such effort was a semester seminar for juniors led by Michelle<sup>43</sup> and Sandra. This seminar, would come to focus on youth activism. I attended their first meeting which was used as a brainstorming session. Rather than meeting in the Greenberg room, mentors and students used an empty math classroom. Students came in and took their seat as Sandra and Michelle set things up on the board. Students were socializing with one another and some were eating snacks. The four juniors of which *Lisette* and *Camilla* were a part of also included one Latino and one white male student. Sandra and Michelle wanted the juniors to begin getting a feel for scholarly articles and wanted them to identify a topic of interest to them. As the meeting started Sandra and Michelle pointed to a piece of construction paper they had used to write their goals for the seminar:

- Explore multi-faceted aspects of a topic
- Gain confidence reading and making meaning from academic articles
- Have a conversation with the text
- Be an active member of the discussion

Sandra and Michelle, asked the students to generate a list of expectations for themselves. *Lisette* said, "It's really important for us to be comfortable with each other and to listen to one another respectfully." As she was eating her Chobani yogurt, *Camilla* then spoke and said, "Be ready to

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<sup>43</sup> This Michelle is not the same as the student participant. Michelle Levinson was one of the Greenberg Achiever Mentors.

participate, be willing to state your viewpoint and maybe like offer up your ideas as to what the author is trying to argue.” *Lisette* then added on by saying that the group should be prepared and read the articles. Sandra and Michelle noted that for the first couple of weeks, they would provide the articles for them, but that after that students would suggest articles for the group to read. As the students discussed a possible topic, Michelle and Sandra wrote them on the board. The group had talked about focusing on urban education, racial discrimination, policy/law, socio-economic issues, and neighborhood segregation. *Camilla* then asked for more ideas and shared another idea. She said, “I like the idea of activism.” This prompted the male students in the group to jump into the conversation and suggested police relations, ideological freedom around the world, and religion. After a brief lull in the conversation, I jumped into the fray by building upon *Camilla*’s idea on activism. I saw this as an opportunity to help engage students on a topic I was passionate about. I talked about how they could look at youth activism and youth identity. Sandra and Michelle continued to write down other ideas. After a few more minutes, they left the room and let the students vote on their preference. I was silent during their conversation, but the students opted for youth activism and youth culture. Needless to say, I was ecstatic.

During their seminar meetings, Sandra and Michelle would come to use some of the recommendations I gave them. They had used a couple of chapters from books by Nancy Lesko and Hava Rachel Gordon focusing on youth activism and youth as a social construct. They wanted to build a foundation for the students and students took to their approach. In one of their early meetings, they were talking about Gordon’s chapter on youth as a social construct and Sandra and Michelle asked students to make connections to their lives. Michelle started off their conversation by asking them to talk about what age inequality. *Camilla* commented by saying, “I

never saw adults as oppressors before, but after reading the chapter I can see that now.” Sandra and Michelle also used this conversation to talk about other “isms” which allowed *Lisette* to talk about sexism and racism. During the conversation, *Lisette* was taking down notes, highlighting portions of the chapter, while *Camilla* sat back and took things in. This was typical of them, with *Lisette* being the active note-taker and *Camilla* the observer and thought-processor. Toward the end of their meeting *Lisette* said, “Young people’s voices aren’t being heard so they don’t speak up and aren’t heard.” Prompting Sandra to ask the group, “How might adults dominate?” *Camilla* noted how, “A teen might go to an organization led by adults and wouldn’t be taken seriously.” *Lisette* added by saying, “in the book it talked about community politics and youth voices being belittled and not having a sense of belonging.” She finished by saying, “You might oppress yourself too.”

I include these portions of my fieldnotes to demonstrate moments when student participants in Greenberg were listened to and affirmed. By having a space to talk about issues they care about and by being given the opportunity to lead and shape conversations students were not only engaging in academic conversations but also voicing observations about their experiences at SHS. While students often had to go on field trips as ways to learn about others, these trips often took a deficit approach. The idea of enrichment implies that something is lacking in the lives of the predominately Latina/o students who make up Greenberg. I am not saying that it is not important to not go see an opera or to attend summer camp, but when it is framed in the sense that if you do these things you will then succeed. Doing so perpetuates inequality and it conveys a message to students that who they are and their identities are not the norm and not to be valued. The cohort of mentors during my time realized that. They made a concerted effort to push-back when the opportunity arose and pushed the envelope on

programming. It was important to them for students to learn about themselves and attend fieldtrips that reminded them of the richness of their culture and identities. Program mentors' efforts, such as the seminar conducted with juniors, was one such effort to counter Greenberg's larger policies that tended to stifle and frustrate students.

### **College Resource Center & The Learning Center**

Located on the first floor of the school the College Resource Center (CRC) and The Learning Center (TLC) are hubs where students can work on school work, receive academic support from teachers and peers, and during the lunch periods students are also able to eat while they work. Both rooms are open and available to all students during the school day and each space has a full-time staff member working in each room.

The CRC is adjacent to the counseling department and it overlooks the front of the school. The room's walls feature numerous posters and informational flyers or pamphlets from varied colleges and universities along with information on serving in the military. Five large rectangular tables are in the room along with a large office desk that a staff member works out of. The carpeted room is well trafficked by school staff as the room divides the some of the counseling department's offices and kitchen. Officially, the room is for students to learn about the college process, pick up information, meet with visiting college and university representatives. Students also use the space to do work during the school day, but the CRC sees the most foot traffic during lunch periods. During lunch periods, students would eat their lunch, socialize with friends, and complete their school work. Yet, unlike the cafeteria and commons, the space audibly was more subdued. The CRC was also a room that throughout the school day, but specifically during the lunch periods was occupied mainly by white, upperclassmen. The white students who used this space were typically in upper-level classes such as AP, were

heavily involved in extracurricular activities, and were on track to pursue a degree in higher education. Of the student participants in the study, only two, *Liliana* and *Hannah*, would use the space during their lunch periods. That is not to say that other participants did not enter the room to pick up or drop off a form or ask a quick question, but in talking with students it became clear that they used staff who they considered allies to learn about scholarships and schools in addition to consulting with their counselor or one of two college counselors at SHS. *Liliana* and *Hannah* were two students who were more comfortable around white students, both had attended middle schools with larger white student populations and some of their closest friends were white. I want to underscore that just because *Hannah* and *Liliana* hang out more often with white students in school does not mean that they also did not experience some of the microaggressions Latina/o youth experienced.

The TLC, across the hall from the CRC features numerous small round tables for students to do their work. At the entrance, a large desk is used by the staff member supervising the area. Unlike the CRC, the TLC had more people in it during non-lunch hours, but like the CRC its busiest times were during lunch. On any given day, you would find students talking with their friends, working with a group or by themselves, you would also see staff in the room. Teachers at SHS rotate in and out of TLC as a supervisory responsibility and work with students if asked. The space also has students as tutors available to take questions. This room, did not have as many posters on its walls, but the ones it did have included motivational quotes encouraging students to try and succeed. Like the TLC, the room is heavily trafficked and used by white students. The room during lunch time is heavily used by white underclassmen that are on track to be in upper-level classes and are involved in school activities. Latina/o youth typically did not use this space often, if they did it was because they were sent by a teacher to receive support or



were meeting with their teacher for one-on-one support. In my observations, the white students who used TLC used this space as a training group for them to then use the CRC when they became upperclassmen.

During student interviews, I asked students about the CRC and TLC. Students are acutely aware of who primarily uses the CRC and TLC. They know that these are white spaces, white spaces for academically oriented white students. For instance, when I asked *Richard* to describe the type of white student who goes to the TLC and CRC, he responded with:

**Richard:** The studious kind, the ones that are very focused on education 24/7. It's usually them and they're the kind of student that go to really good schools.

Their awareness of who occupies these two spaces, also extended to them knowing or feeling that these spaces because of white students lead them not to traverse or engage with them.

Student participants spoke about their discomfort.

**Gabriel:** Hm. I think for me one of the more frustrating things that I hear sometimes students say whether they're White or Latino and some staff say is that you know why don't more Latino students join clubs, why don't they sit in the Commons, why don't they sit in the TLC or the CRC, why don't they participate more in class? How would you respond to that?

**MacDaddy:** We don't do it because we feel weird doing it.

**Gabriel:** Because I imagine that, I imagine that you guys know about that right?

**MacDaddy:** Yeah but it's uncomfortable though. It's like the same reason, why didn't they go to our soccer games?

**Gabriel:** Any reasons why you don't see many Latino students in the TLC or CRC?

**Joaquín:** I think we like to hang in the cafeteria. We sometimes do our homework and it feels more comfortable. I did used to use the TLC, but to me it was the teacher who wanted me there, but never because I wanted to go there. We don't like looking for help. If we need help, we ask our friends.

**Gabriel:** One thing that I noticed is that the TLC and CRC is very white for the most part, why do you think Latino students don't usually go there during lunch or a free period?

**Richard:** At least for me, I don't know I always grew up hesitant to ask for help I don't know why. There's always that idea that I can do it myself if I really try hard enough I don't necessarily need cuz most kids won't think of teachers tutoring them they'll just think of kids and feel inferior about that and also, they take those free periods literally free periods. To go in and ask for help for something that will be due or for a test that's due next week, I don't know, I don't see Latino students doing that unless they prioritize that at a high level. Most of them are in the now, what's due now. So, to go and study during a free period when they can go with their friends, more so they'll go with their friends.

*MacDaddy* and *Joaquín's* commentary speaks to feeling uncomfortable in a space that has been categorized as a white space on the part of Latina/o youth at SHS. Why would youth subject themselves to a space they do not feel comfortable in? *Joaquín* also builds upon the weirdness and discomfort youth feel by also noting he does not feel comfortable asking for help. Like *Joaquín*, *Richard* talks about feeling hesitant when he needs support. In my observations and other interviews with participants, this idea of feeling inferior and showing weakness came through. Attending a school that is predominately white and a school that has the prestige of being known for its academics plays an important role in leading Latina/o youth not to seek help. Several youths felt inferior or on edge in their classrooms. As was noted in the previous chapter *Jay* spoke about feeling like he has to be right and avoids making mistakes as to disprove any negative notions white students or staff may have about Latina/o youth. This idea of not making a mistake, speaks to the tenuous nature Latina/o youth must confront. Further, other participants talked about not using these spaces because they wanted to use their free periods to relax and connect with their friends.

**Gabriel:** One of the things that I've seen in the TLC, there usually isn't a lot of Latinos:

**Victor:** Yeah, that's all white people, oh yeah that's another spot.

**Gabriel:** Why don't they go in there?

**Victor:** Because Latinos don't like asking for help?

**Gabriel:** Why?

**Victor:** That's a good question, I honestly don't know. I feel like I used to be like that, but now I'm more comfortable asking for help.

**Gabriel:** Whenever you have a free period, do you usually go to the library, or the TLC, what do you usually do?

**Victor:** I don't have any free period, except for 9<sup>th</sup> and I go home. But last year I had 2<sup>nd</sup> free and I would go to the library with my friends.

**Gabriel:** We've talked about the commons and the cafeteria and some of the racial divisions and I notice in the TLC and the CRC, they're places for white students to do work or eat or both. Why do you think Latino students don't go there very often?

**Lisette:** I think Latinos during their free periods like to be with friends and to be talking and I think there's this idea of how much they care about their education. Like obviously, I've been to the TLC and white people are either doing work or eating, but they're always doing homework. I feel like during free time I'm like I don't want to do homework, I want to be with my friends.

*Victor* and *Lisette* offer powerful insights into how students use their free time. The school's strong academic culture causes a great deal of stress on all of its students, but this academic environment is something that Latina/o youth are also rejecting. This rejection is not saying they are anti-school. On the contrary, they are envisioning a different type of schooling that allows them to succeed in the classroom, while also maintain a healthy social life. *Lisette's* commentary in particular speaks to us about how SHS should imagine spaces and demand stop trying to send so many Latina/o youth into these spaces that are not welcoming or conducive to their needs.

### **"I'm Proud to be a Chicana, but are we Unidos?"<sup>44</sup>**

"I'm Esther and I'm proud to be a Chicana, I want others to know that and I want to teach others about our history." I quickly started writing to keep up with what *Esther* had said to other members of Latinos Unidos (LU). During this meeting 24 Latina/o students had gathered in a

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<sup>44</sup> Translate: United

circle and their club sponsors Mr. Velasquez, the school's English Language Learner department chair and Mrs. Kahlo, the school's social worker asked each student to introduce themselves. Not only did I have to feverishly type to keep up with what *Esther* had said, I also had to work hard to temper my emotions, because I knew this was the only meeting I had attended. I needed to give myself time to get a stronger feel for the dynamics of Latinos Unidos and their foci. But observing *Esther* declare pride in her ethno-racial identity was at the very least an indicator of the important role Latinos Unidos played at SHS.

Created by a former Latino math teacher and a white science teacher at Shields to create community for Latina/o students, LU's mission serves as a support system for Latina/o students, dedicated to honoring and discussing issues important to them. LU has an active service component involving community service, fundraising, and babysitting for Latina/o parents who come to SHS for workshops. Meeting once a week, LU met in SHS's English Language Learner Resource Room. The room features u-shaped tables throughout the room, with shelves with books in English and Spanish and school supplies. Along one of the walls are a set of desktop computers available for students to use. Further there is a mural that spans two walls. The mural was commissioned by an artist after receiving input from students. The mural features different flags from around the world, with different images of cultural pride. I made it a point to attend meetings, participate, and serve as a resource for students and Mr. Velasquez and Mrs. Kahlo. In the two years that I spent learning from LU, several issues came to the forefront. What I was most interested in learning more about, was what did LU mean to Latina/o students? In analyzing my fieldnotes and interview data, LU was a space of community, a space where Latina/o students could talk to one another and socialize. *Hannah* described Latinos Unidos as "fun" and being "very open." Sofia, in talking about why LU is important to her said, "It's one of the

places where we get to interact with each other.” In speaking with *Esther*, she too voiced a sense of community.

**Esther:** We’re able to take out the stress that we had that day with jokes and Mr. Velasquez has jokes and would say stuff that my mom would say. We feel more at home and don’t feel like we’re staying afterschool for the sake of it looking good for college applications. We feel at home.

Yet, to an outsider, meetings may appear to be “chaotic” or even unproductive. Upon entering the space, particularly at the start of meetings, students would come in; some would put down their backpacks and head to the bathroom or go down to the cafeteria to pick up their free meal for staying after school. Students would sit with their friends, divisions existed between age and gender and within these they then broke down based on social cliques. You would see playful, code-switching linguistic banter amongst students and their club sponsors. During the first year of data collection, I attended an LU meeting where the focus was to provide feedback for an event they had done the previous week. In my fieldnotes I wrote:

What an interesting time at Latinos Unidos. There was a lot of people, the group seems to lack structure and guidance. I think it’s important that students be given space to do their thing, but it seems like they need some additional input or at least guidance on what steps they need to take or at least consider. That was my vantage point from afar, but maybe the activities they did turned out well. The food component was lacking and needed more organization. It seems like the older members are quick to blame new members for not being responsible, but how can the new members know if they are not shown how to follow through.

Upon closer inspection, there *was* structure to LU, this structure was one that provided students the opportunity for Latina/o students to socialize with one another. This is not to say that these students did not socialize during the school day, but having that unstructured time allowed them to be more comfortable, it allowed them to have a sense of a communal family. Moreover, LU always seemed to get the job done. Here I was critiquing an organization for a supposed lack of structure, yet they had over 20 students attend a cookout! I had to check myself and not impose

perhaps my ideal way of running a meeting, or worse yet impose a white Eurocentric way of running after school meetings. LU was family to many of its students and a family is rarely orderly. Additionally, in this particular meeting, juniors and seniors were calling out new members for not being responsible enough. I did not interpret this as tensions within the Latina/o community, but as a moment of protection on the part of upperclassmen. The hectic nature of LU was done in large part to the varied responsibilities they took on.

I had come in a few minutes late to an October meeting, I came to find LU members preparing for Día de los Muertos<sup>45</sup>. The meeting was action packed and fast moving. Students were preparing to sell popcorn the following morning, students made flyers, they were tracking down crafts they had used in previous Día de los Muertos events. I took a seat next to *Hannah* and we talked about her day while she worked on making flyers. We spoke about our respective days; she spoke about her frustrations with her French teacher. During our conversation, *Jay* jumped in and asked me what I thought about the football program at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. We joked about how mad the team was. *Hannah* remarked that she and her cousin were going to the Northwestern vs. Illinois football game and that I should join them. I had joked with her that because she was going that I would not be going, which prompted this sarcastic response of displeasure and then laughter between the three of us. The meeting would continue with students working, talking, and laughing. Yet LU was not for all Latina/o students, in talking with participants about why they were not part of this club raised interesting questions. In speaking with *Esther* talked about students feeling lazy, but she also said, “balancing homework and a lot of my Latino friends who haven’t been able to commit because of work and when you’re pushing yourself academically it makes it tougher. They’re also teenagers and don’t

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<sup>45</sup> Translation: Day of the Dead

want to take up too much time after school” *Liliana*, during our interview spoke about not wanting to be defined by LU, that she did not want to be defined exclusively by this club, that she was more than LU. This speaks to a pressure and sense of belonging, that some Latina/o youth do not want to be defined by their ethno-racial identity, they wanted to be embraced by the larger ethno-racial fabric at the school.

During my interview with *Michelle*, we spoke about her involvement with LU. She had mentioned that she was a member during her junior year, she was motivated to join because her older sister had been part of the club when she was a student. But she then complicates why she did not continue:

**Michelle:** I’m not in it. I was in it for a week last year. I wanted to join because my sister was in it and I heard really good things about it, but then like I was in it and it was kind of bad of me to do. I kept making excuses to not be in it. I mean it was a lot of work; I did it when I was a junior. Junior year was super busy for me. I didn’t want to stress out about a club. I wasn’t really into it. I think I could have been, I like those topics, but watching videos and taking notes on it that’s what I got out of it. I don’t know if I see a point in it. It’s good to be aware, to know when things happened, this is why this is happening now, that’s good, I think that part of the club is good, but when you’re taking notes and you’re just taking notes to be considered in Chicano bowl I’m not a fan of that.

### **Un Lugar de Ambiente<sup>46</sup>: The Latino College Bowl**

Shortly after the death of the iconic Mexican singer Juan Gabriel, National Public Radio’s (NPR) Alt Latino music podcast paid tribute to his body of work. The commentators spoke fondly about their memories of listening to his music and its impact on their lives. At one point, the commentators decided to play one of his best-known songs, “Noa, Noa.” Listening to the song, at that moment, gave me a new lens by which to make sense of SHS’ Latino College Bowl. In, “Noa, Noa” Juan Gabriel pays homage to a nightclub that gave him his first break, describing it as, “Este es un lugar de ambiente donde todo es diferente. Donde siempre

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<sup>46</sup> Translation: This place has a good vibe, a good environment

alegremente balaras toda la noche ahí.<sup>47</sup>” El Noa, Noa, specifically the dance floor has immense significance for Juan Gabriel. The commentators discussed the significance of the dance floor in conjunction with the word ambiente. The word is often used in queer communities to represent a safe space, a space to celebrate in the midst of a society that all too often is not inclusive and hospitable. Alternatively, the dance floor offers the opportunity to celebrate identity, to enact identities that are more meaningful, authentic to oneself. Similarly, the Latino College Bowl at SHS is a space that Latina/o students take ownership of, to enact identities that they at times do not engage in, to occupy spaces they often do not take ownership of.

### **Future Saxons**

Created to ease the transition to high school for middle school students of color, the program is composed of mainly Latina/o students called mentees. The high school students hired, serve as the program’s mentors and are also majority Latina/o. Run by the school principal, Dr. Solverson and Mr. Velasquez, the program operates during the school year focusing on 8<sup>th</sup> graders in the fall semester and 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> graders in the spring semester. Dr. Solverson noted that in the past several mentor applicants were interested in the program, but because they worked outside of school they could not participate in the program. He then went ahead and partnered with community members to receive a grant to pay mentors. The program meets twice a week. Mentees come to SHS on Mondays afterschool and on Wednesdays afterschool mentors meet with Mr. Velasquez to plan for the next Monday, give one another feedback, and strategize on how to best meet the needs of the middle schoolers. There are approximately 50 to 75 middle school students who are placed in small groups and paired with

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<sup>47</sup> Translation: This place has a good vibe, where everything is different. Where you always happily dance the night away.



20 mentors. The mentors hired are trained in leadership and mentorship and run their own meetings to instill ownership. The purpose of mentee visits to SHS are to acquaint them to the varied academic and elective classes they could take, along with talking about the afterschool activities that are available to them. Moreover, the school partnered with a local non-profit to run workshops on socio-emotional issues (e.g. stress management, identity).

During the two years of the study I got to grasp of how Latina/o students worked toward easing the transition to SHS for their mentees. Students thought critically about what classes to talk about, what electives they wanted their mentees to know. One of the key motivators was encouraging students to take classes that Latina/o youth typically did not take. Yet, what mentors struggled with was how far to go in talking to their mentees about the realities that they and others have had to face. During one of their meetings during the second year of data collection, such a conversation took place.

The meeting started off with a general question from Mr. Velasquez on what mentors wanted to accomplish in the following year, what sort of future initiatives did they want to implement. *Camilla* started the conversation by telling the group that it was important to talk to teachers at SHS about the difficulties of being a person of color, she would go on to say, “It’s not that we don’t understand the content, but it’s the environment that we’re placed in.” *Camilla’s* comment is to be understood as one issuing a critique at the structures in place that have led to deficit educational practices. *Camilla’s* commentary launched a lively conversation amongst the rest of the mentors. For example, *Esther* she talked about the importance of demystifying classes that appear scary to Latina/o students. *Camilla* continued by saying, “We need to assemble a group of teachers who are supportive of Latino students and do a fishbowl to talk about how they support their students.” Students continued to listen, and *Esther* supported *Camilla’s* idea by

talking about how teachers could benefit from some sort of teacher engagement. She shared with the group how she and another mentor are spotlighted by their French teacher. How their teacher points them out for being Mexican, and while his effort is to be inclusive it falls short because it puts them on the spot as perpetual spokespeople for their community. *Esther* would go on to reference her AP Psychology teacher and how she considers him as supportive but struggles in calling out students who are being disrespectful. When referencing the issues at play for Latina/o students, “It’s something that is known, but unknown.”

For *Esther* and *Camilla*, their critiques of SHS and more specifically of their teachers is one that calls for a greater understanding of their culture, but one that also challenges them to learn from them and a call to action to use their power as educators to challenge and educate their white students. As *Esther* noted the issues they face are in many ways widely known by staff. Yet, staff and white peers fail/falter/often struggle with how to approach Latina/o students and create more inclusive spaces for them.

Mr. Velasquez remained quiet for most of this conversation, stepping back, nodding, occasionally asking clarification, but mainly was looking at me with a smile. At one point in the conversation, he praised the group by saying, “You are shaping policy, what you’re doing goes beyond what you were hired for.” Clearly the group was wrestling with essential questions at the heart of why Latina/o students do not feel comfortable in white spaces, why they do not occupy certain spaces or try out for certain extracurricular activities. The group wanted to create a better message to their mentees to ensure that their experiences would be less painful, more fruitful.

Yet, not all students agreed. For instance, a male Latino student said:

Some of my friends want to drop out of classes and underclassmen hear this and think it’s okay. It’s something that reminded me of my time in physics when I wanted to drop. My teacher wouldn’t let me drop the class. Deficit is something we hear, just negative things about joining honors classes and talking about the positives and reducing negative things.

We need to emphasize the positives of the classes. The reality of the classes are just not negative like *Esther*. It will create fear in students.

For this student, negative perceptions associated with taking upper-level classes needed to be combated with positives in order to demystify these classes. As he put it talking about the negatives, would “create fear in students.” *Esther* responded, “I’m not going to hide the truth that there is going to be some rough parts. I like to hear the negatives and hear about turning them into positives.” In hearing this comment, *Sofia* chimed in by attempting to find common ground between *Esther* and her male counterpart:

It’s okay to tell them that it’s okay to be the only Latino in the class. You have the power to change and to be inclusive in the class. It’s your high school career, make it what you want. Stop thinking that being the only Latino is bad, but we’ve had those experiences and we’ve learned from those experiences and we’ve learned to have our voice listened to.

*Sofia*’s remarks speak to what she has taken out of her experiences in predominately white classrooms. As one of the few Latina students in honors and AP classes she acknowledges the power individuals have to persist in an effort to survive and thrive. While she did not offer ideas on how to make students stop thinking about being the sole or one of the few people of color in a class, she does highlight the importance of learning from those experiences and finding voice to have others listen. Ultimately, the group did not come up with a concrete plan of action, but came away with it with an energy, that was important for the next group of mentors to implement. Moreover, this portion of my fieldnotes demonstrates the awareness Latina/o students have about themselves, what is said about them, but also their ideas on how to move forward. How to move forward, though proved to be more delicate. Students were understanding and approaching this issue from different lenses. For *Camilla* and *Esther*, they were more willing to confront systemic issues within the building, even if it meant highlighting the “bad” in order to help equip teachers with needed tools to support them. Contrasting *Sofia* and her male counterpart espoused an

individualistic rhetoric of persisting despite the odds, lending credence to the power an individual possesses.

### **Finding Community in the Classroom**

One of the most compelling classroom spaces I spent time in was a freshman level social studies course focused on the history of the world. The section I spent the most time in was with Ms. Davis, a teacher who was widely respected by students, particularly students of color at SHS. One of the reasons, students considered her a strong ally was because of her thoughtful and purposeful approach toward building classroom community and incorporating student knowledge into the classroom. My first time in her classroom she spent time getting to know her students by having them talk about what they considered to be their strengths. For instance, students were divided into small groups of four people with each person having a specific responsibility. Each group had a motivator, visionary, networker, and translator. These traits were presented in non-essentialized ways and it allowed students to begin to trust and embrace the knowledge they brought to the classroom. Ms. Davis, was also an educator that was willing to challenge and scaffold conversations with white students to help them recognize their white privilege. When these moments occurred, Latina/o students would often remain quiet, but in informal conversations with them they spoke about how it helped them have a voice. The classroom community she helped build with students, also was enhanced by the ascetics of the classroom. Ms. Davis had culturally relevant posters of leading civil rights activists and books from authors of color. Moreover, she also made it a point to have warm, home-like classroom that featured a sofa and pictures of her students as babies to help foster a culture of family. These aspects allowed her to then have meaningful social justice-based conversations with students.

For example, she facilitated a conversation around Native American mascots in professional sports.

**Figure 14: Image of Class Handout of Native American Mascot**



During this particular lesson, Ms. Davis began class by telling her students that, “We have a social practice of naming teams and creating logos that some would argue are racist.” She had her students read an article from the *New York Times Magazine* and had them annotate for the arguments people in the article made in favor and against Native American mascots. This class was a majority white, but with several Latina/o students. As students came together to process with one another, Ms. Davis returned to the theme of the unit they were covering on China. While on the surface, perhaps there is no connection between China and Native American mascots, her link between the two was as said, “trying to understand what philosophy is holding

that up.” By “that up” she was referring to the beliefs and values that drove societies to embrace certain issues of power, inclusion, and exclusion. While the outcomes of the conversations were less clear, her repeated engagement in social justice issues was enabled by her willingness to build community in a way that disrupted the whiteness of SHS and fostered the creativity and knowledge of her students of color.

Other teachers took on different approaches toward building classrooms where Latina/o students felt comfortable and incorporated their culture into the curriculum. Ms. Borges a Spanish teacher was known for challenging her students and engaging in playful banter. On one of the days I sat in on her AP Spanish Literature class, she deviated from the curriculum and briefly told students about growing in Argentina and the military junta in Argentina. She began class by playing a song she enjoyed listening to as a teenager from a punk rock group called *Ataque 77*. While students were bobbing their heads, she asked them to listen to the lyrics and recognize the political nature of the song. She shared how when she was young, her friend lost a sister to the military dictatorship. News in the U.S. was beginning to spread about the scope of the disappeared teachers in Iguala, Guerrero who were part of the Ayotzinapa Rural Teachers College. In talking with her students about these issues, she would at times berate them in a playful manner, by telling not to be “tontos” to pay attention. The playful banter of insults helped create a culture in which her Latina/o students could do the same without the fear of retribution or confusion on the part of others as to why they were tearing each other apart. The culture of playful insults was a cultural connection Ms. Borges relied upon to connect to students, to share aspects about her life, while also incorporating social justice messages in her curriculum.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

The likelihood of this conversation happening outside of this space or any other space used by Latina/o students would be unlikely. The space and opportunity for these Latina/o students to grow as mentors and support the transition of future students at SHS ultimately led them to feel comfortable and empowered to make an earnest effort on how to alter the status quo, asking how to best create more humane spaces and real opportunities for Latina/o students. Yet, as the data of this chapter demonstrates Latina/o youth are interlopers in a school that is supposed to be their home. The spaces that exist for all students are occupied by varied white students, thus pushing out Latina/o youth to the margins. The organizations and clubs available to Latina/o youth play an important role in creating a sense of community, yet it is indicative of SHS being two schools. While, I am not advocating for these to be eliminated, in fact we should invest more in these resources, I am asking SHS to reconsider how it creates and sustains spaces, how it recruits for afterschool activities. Many of its clubs and spaces appear to be neutral, open to all students, but Latina/o youth know that they are for white students. But because of their privilege whiteness is removed from the club or spaces title. In short, Latina/o youth have to carve out and fight for the preservation of spaces that help them learn about their ethno-racial identities, that allow them to enact identities that are more authentic to them, and to come together and make an impact in and out of their school community.

## Chapter 7: Critical Romanticism: Where Do We Go from Here?

“There ain’t no back in the day, shit. Ain’t no nostalgia to this shit here. There’s just the street, and the game, and what happen here today.”

Cheese Wagstaff, *The Wire*

“Radical hope is our best weapon against despair, even when despair seems justifiable; it makes the survival of the end of your world possible. Only radical hope could have imagined people like us into existence. And I believe that it will help us create a better, more loving future.”

Junot Diaz, “Radical Hope”, *The New Yorker*

It will be very difficult to leave Shields High School. My two years of fieldwork and one year as a teaching aide in special education have allowed me to build meaningful relationships with students. I am fortunate that they allowed me into their worlds, showing me the complexity of their lives and how they go about making sense of life in and out of school. I am grateful for the laughs, the playful insults, the intellectual conversations and yet, as I write this paragraph I am beginning to romanticize my time at SHS. In the famous *HBO* series, *The Wire* Method Man portrays a backstabbing drug dealer who in the quote above criticizes another character for harkening back to a better time in the drug business in Baltimore. By saying, “There ain’t no back in the day, shit, ain’t no nostalgia to this shit here” he is reminding his counterpart about the need not to reconstruct a past that most likely was not any better than the present. Therefore, part of this chapter’s responsibility is to complicate notions of romanticism in doing fieldwork with Latina/o youth. Further, rather than make the argument that Latina/o youth need grit and embrace a mindset of growth as some scholars would argue, I propose an alternative that brings into to focus the trauma that Latina/o youth must grapple with. Additionally, I discuss how general efforts at SHS to support Latina/o youth do not go far enough and discuss ways we can counter systemic issues of inequality while also helping equip students with tools to navigate the “game



of school.” Finally, I discuss practices in and out of the classroom that educators should embrace when attending to the needs and aspirations of Latina/o youth.

### **Critical Romanticism & Critical Hope in Uncertain Times**

This dissertation comes about during a deeply important and historical juncture in American history. We live in a time when it is acceptable for a president to launch his presidential ambitions with hateful vitriol against Mexicans and immigrants. In his address to a roomful of observers he would say to the world, “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best. They’re not sending you, they’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with us. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists and some, I assume are good people.” This rhetoric would mark the beginning of his divisive rhetoric on the campaign trail, but these words were only a continuation of actions and speech against people he deems inferior.

His presence as our nation’s “leader” ushers in an era of seemingly endless adjectives revolving around anger, despair, fear, and uncertainty. In the field of education, we must now contend with a stunningly unqualified Secretary of Education who when pressed during her confirmation hearing by Connecticut Senator Chris Murphy on whether guns had any place in schools would respond with an imagined cockamamie idea of a gun being used in school to protect from potential grizzly bear attacks. But perhaps nothing was more telling about the direction Secretary DeVos wants to take public education in, in her exchange with Senator Patty Murray:

**Murray:** Can you commit to us tonight that you will not work to privatize public schools or cut a single penny from public education?

**DeVos:** Senator, thanks for that question. I look forward, if confirmed, to working with you to talk about how we address the needs of all parents and all students. And we acknowledge today that not all schools are working for the students that are assigned to

them. And I'm hopeful that we can work together to find common ground and ways that we can solve those issues and empower parents to make choices on behalf of their children that are right for them.

**Murray:** I take that as not being willing to commit to not privatizing public schools or cutting money from education."

**DeVos:** I guess I wouldn't characterize it in that way.

Time will tell what will become of education policy and its impact on everyday life in schools. It appears that before we move forward we will continue to spiral into a deeper abyss. But I firmly believe that youth and their allies will continue to fight by pushing back. While student participants spoke about their struggles navigating SHS, some struggled in conveying their thoughts on how to improve schooling for themselves and other youth. This is a byproduct of schooling which rarely provide young people the opportunity to envision or reimagine new or different ways to organize school. Part of this dissertation's responsibility is to argue that Latina/o youth should have a seat at the table, they are stakeholders that must be listened to in any effort to combat what may come in these troubled times. The first step toward reclaiming our schools will be radical hope. In the aftermath of the presidential election, Junot Díaz's (2016) letter in *The New Yorker* to his sister speaks to us about the importance of mourning, embracing the sense of loss, safety, and where we belong moving forward. But, he also advocates for action, Díaz (2016) writes, "And while we're doing the hard, necessary work of mourning, we should avail ourselves of the old formations that have seen us through darkness. We organize. We form solidarities. And, yes: we fight. To be heard. To be safe. To be free" (par. 6). I write at the intersection of critical romanticism and critical hope, for I think there is something palpable and vital to write from this vantage point.

I am not advocating for naïve romantic notions of schooling that quite frankly have never existed. Such romanticism would erase the violence that Latina/o youth have encountered in their

lives. I am conceptualizing critical romanticism from the position of celebrating the complexity and vibrancy of Latina/o youth. I honor the elasticity of their identities that they must enact to survive and thrive. I honor their pain and sorrow in the face of the unspeakable violence Latina/o youth encounter. Moreover, I am critically optimistic about the role our public schools can play in our present and future. Schools can be sites of possibility, they are places where Latina/o youth can learn, be empowered to recognize the worlds around them and work to transform them. How can I not be a romantic about some of the relationships I saw between student participants and their teachers? As the previous data chapters have illustrated, when these moments occur, they give us insights into the possibilities of what schools that honor Latina/o identities and their culture can look like.

For these moments to occur regularly, we need to double down on the type of hope that Díaz is calling for. Like critical romanticism, I am calling for a critical, grounded sense of hope as we move collectively to fight for change. In writing about critical hope, Duncan-Andrade (2009) contends that educators must work with youth toward helping cultivate the skills necessary to reflect and critique the forces in their lives. Duncan-Andrade (2009) writes, “To accomplish this, we have to bust the false binary that suggests we must choose between an academically rigorous pedagogy and one geared toward social justice” (p. 186). As Duncan-Andrade (2009) and other scholars posit, it is critically important for youth to be engaged in the classroom through a pedagogy that allows them to see pressing issues in their community and school, to discuss issues relevant to them (Cammarota, 2007; Cammarota, 2011; Delgado Bernal & Alemán, 2017; Irizarry, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2014; López, 2018; Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014, 2017). The fight for justice will be non-linear, it will be filled with uncertainty, it will not include a Hollywood ending with Edward James Olmos walking

with his fist in the air down the hallway of Roosevelt High School at the end of *Stand and Deliver*. What it could entail is forging stronger relationships with Latina/o youth, it will require that adults relinquish some of their power in hopes of creating horizontal relationships, relationships that decenter knowledge. It will require an understanding of Latina/o youth that goes beyond black and white binaries, it will require acknowledging their pain, their trauma, and honoring their survivorship. Sometimes that is all we can do, sometimes that is all we get.

### **Beyond Grit: Highlighting Latina/o Youth Trauma and Survivorship**

At SHS, a discourse surrounding grit and growth mindset were embraced to varying degrees by some building administrators and faculty. This embracement came with the hope that it could help Latina/o youth excel in school. Yet the more that I heard about grit and growth mindset, the more questions and concerns I had. The leading voice on grit, Angela Duckworth has garnered the attention of educators across the country. She has written extensively on grit and self-control (Duckworth et al., 2007; Duckworth & Gross, 2014; Duckworth & Steinberg, 2015; Duckworth, 2016; Duckworth, Gendler, & Gross, 2016). In her work with her colleagues she defines grit as the tendency to maintain interest in an effort to complete a long-term goal (Duckworth et al., 2007). In her work, she documents the important role persistence plays in succeeding in school. Yet, Howard (2015) is quick to point out the structural flaws in Duckworth's work.

In *The Atlantic* (2015), Aisha Sultan cites Tyrone Howard's critiques on grit. In the article, Howard is quoted as saying, "We are asking students to change a belief system without changing the situation around them. It can be irresponsible and unfair to talk about grit without talking about structural challenges" (par. 8). How can we honestly expect Latina/o youth to keep trying, to persist despite the odds when they confront so much regularly? The rhetoric around grit

easily blends into a meritocracy, bootstrap argument (Saltman, 2014; Gorski, 2016; Golden, 2017). Golden writes, “The pedagogy at work in the grit narrative is one that seeks to erase awareness of inequities and critical consciousness of power inequalities” (Golden, 2017, p. 348). As Howard contends, experience with trauma has immense impact on the academic and socio-emotional outcomes for students. Howard posits that youth dealing with trauma should not be seen as pathological, rather, “[...] educators need to recognize the resilience they are showing already. The instruments and surveys that have been used to measure social-emotional skills such as persistence and grit have not considered these factors” (par. 10). Latina/o youth need to stop being told that they need grit, what they need is to be listened to, having to navigate a predominately white high school can take a toll on its students. As was discussed in detail in chapter 4, all participants spoke about the pressures of having to navigate white spaces and their white peers. What youth need are outlets for what Ginwright (2010) calls, “radical healing.”

At SHS, the school has invested resources in its counseling department by having social workers, psychologists on hand for all its students. The fact that the counseling department has created several support groups, including support groups for Latina, Latino, English Language Learners, and for Dreamers is a step in the right direction. These spaces are invaluable for Latina/o youth to feel at ease, to vent, to gain support, and to learn. Yet, what more can be done for Latina/o youth to feel at ease more often throughout SHS? While Latina/o young people may feel better and empowered in these spaces, what good are they if they have set-backs, continue to experience more microaggressions if the issues they experience are not combatted elsewhere.

### **Working toward Insurgent Citizenship: Empowering Latina/o Youth**

The work on the part of several educators at SHS to support Latina/o youth should be considered a “political act” (Freire, 1970). Yet, despite their efforts more needs to be done.

While the work of educators was not a purview of this dissertation, their efforts to create opportunities and distribute resources was certainly something I was mindful of when examining its impact on the identities of Latina/o youth and their sense of belonging. Latina/o youth at SHS have numerous opportunities and resources at their disposal. Yet, as the work of Lewis-McCoy (2014) documents, these opportunities and resources do not always make their way to those that need them the most. I worry that notions of grit, growth-mindset cause divisions within the Latina/o student community at SHS. By propping up the high achieving students, by turning to them all the time, not only does that cause burn out, but also does nothing but hurt students who are not positioned as such. That because they are “gritty” and “persisted,” they are worthy of resources. “[...] “merit” becomes an organizing principle for resource allocation by constructing and codifying some students as more “worthy” or “deserving” than others (Zirkel & Pollack, 2016). Instead, we should view all Latina/o students as “holders and creators of knowledge” (Delgado Bernal, 2002). Scholars have demonstrated the work of educators to rethink how they engage with Latina/o youth in their schools (Camarota & Romero, 2014; Delgado Bernal & Alemán, 2017; Duncan-Andrade & Morell, 2008; Kohli & Pizarro, 2016; Stovall, 2016; Urrieta, 2009; Valenzuela, 2016). Moreover, beyond SHS reflecting on its policies, initiatives, and allocation of resources, SHS also needs to think more about how they engage Latina/o youth and their peers.

In my interactions with some educators in the building I would at times get asked questions about best practices that could work for Latina/o youth. Yet, I always struggled to answer this sort of question. I felt that it was important to first discuss how we conceptualize Latina/o youth. How are we understanding their worlds and what level of relationships do we have with them? I acknowledge that as a researcher I have the privilege to ask these questions.

Part of my responsibility is to ask questions, to have teachers think in alternative ways that allow them to think more critically about their practice and interactions with students. To me it is more important to ask questions about what we know, how we imagine, and what sort of relationships educators have with Latina/o youth. I had the privilege to have relationships at the center of my work with youth, unlike teachers who are working within a structure that often limits their ability to grow as educators and to support their efforts in the classroom. At times these opportunities to build relationships are not provided. Further, it was important for me to turn the question around by asking about how we imagine Latina/o youth and the sort of relationships we have with them. To some it may seem like a copout, but I fervently believe that before we implement “best practices” we need to be more reflexive. As Datnow and Park (2015) note it is important to also focus on the principles that are guiding our practices. If our principles do not adhere to them our interactions with students in and out of the classroom will fall short. Viewing Latina/o youth as “at possibility” (Rios, 2011) rather than “at risk” is crucial. In his work with Black and Brown male youth in Oakland, Rios made it a point to talk about youth from the vantage point of what could be, rather than through a deficit-based discourse that assumes youth because of their marginalized identities are in need of attention, that because of who they are they are in need of interventions. As Kwon (2013) writes, “These youth (often poor, minority, and urban) are constructed and understood as an “at-risk” population in need of intervention, whether that takes the form of care or punishment” (p. 7-8). Latina/o youth do not need interventions, they need allies who will listen, advocate, and challenge them based on the assets they bring. In order engage and empower Latina/o youth, insurgent citizenship is vital now more than ever. Glenn (2011) argues that at its core insurgent citizenship works toward destabilizing the present. She writes, “[...] history teaches us that insurgent movements will continue to arise to challenge

dominant assumptions and formulations” (p. 17). While it is important that Latina/o youth become aware of how to navigate Eurocentric structures in school, ultimately it does little if students are not told why they must. Despite well-meaning if we do not tell our youth the importance of this, we are also lying to them. Rather, I propose that in tandem with helping youth play the game of school, we must also work toward transforming it. Ultimately this will require youth to embrace insurgency, to work against the very structures they navigate in. Similarly, in her work with Asian and Pacific Islander youth, Kwon (2013) concludes her book by writing, “[...] it may be that what we need are uncivil subjects, willing to inhabit bad citizenship in order to critique the supposed good faith of the state as a matter of governing ourselves” (p. 130). While difficult, it is important that when we engage with Latina/o youth, that we challenge them to think critically about the ways schooling has and has not worked for them. What is the point of them investing in a system of schooling that all too often works to stifle them rather than liberate? Therefore, Latina/o youth must chart an alternative insurgent, uncivil course that puts into focus their concerns to those they interact with in schools.

Likewise, to understand young people requires an understanding of how the concept of “youth” is constructed. As Jones (2009) writes, “It is clear that understanding the concept of youth means understanding the relationship between young people and society. Young people do not act in a vacuum but in a social context [...]” (p. 30). Young people are complex, and they navigate their lives in dynamic, ever-changing contexts. To treat adolescents as immature, rebellious, inexperienced, or submissive would be a mistake. We are required to study how outside forces shape and inform the lives of young people. Gordon (2010) argues that to study young people’s actions we must come to grips that age is socially, rather than biologically constructed. Work on social constructions of youth by Ariès, 1962; Holt, 1975; James and Prout,



1990; Jenks, 1996; and Platt, 1977 (as cited in Gordon, 2010) have disproven biological explanations. Additionally, there is an overprotection of young people, As John Holt (1975) observes (as cited in Gordon, 2010):

[...] Westernized notions of childhood construct children as a mixture of ‘expensive nuisance, fragile, treasure, slave and supper-pet’ while deeming childhood to be ‘a kind of walled garden in which children, being small and weak, are protected from the harshness of the world outside until they become strong and clever enough to cope with it (p. 22).

Yet, often Latina/o youth and other youth of color are denied even this projection. Youth of color are often constructed as hypermasculine, hypersexualized, their innocence is removed from them (Ferguson, 2001; Gordon, 2010; Rios, 2011, Rios, 2017; Nasir, 2012; Noguera, Hurtado, & Fergus, 2012; Kwon, 2013; Torres, 2017; Tuck & Yang, 2014). This so-called protection of youth in turn suppresses and indoctrinates them, so when youth become adults they perpetuate a vision of activism that connotes rebellion as a bad thing and thus do little or nothing to enact change. Moreover, the often-uttered phrase “children are our future,” which expresses the idea that young people will be the ones who make political decisions as adults; that they will be the gatekeepers of democracy and the caretakers of future generations is flawed. This ideal is never realized because of the overly paternalistic way youth are approached when it comes to civic engagement. They will accomplish all of these objectives in the context of what Gordon (2010) calls “adult political subjectivity” (p. 8). This subjectivity creates a state in which youth are demonized when they deviate from the “norm.” If adults are imposing their view of what it means to be political, knowledgeable, or a citizen, then clearly a contradiction is at work, which maintains that young people are ill equipped to participate and must create citizens out of youth.

I argue that these issues are compounded further when Latina/o youth are in play, given that their identities are already marginalized, for youth who decide to step out and offer critique, then what sort of consequences could be in play?

### **Where Do We Go from Here?**

At its core, this work has been about centering the myriad identities and sense of belonging for Latina/o youth attending a predominately white and well-resourced high school that you have now come to know. This work has also been about decentering whiteness and white supremacy, unmasking it for its diabolical, tantalizing, dehumanizing, all consuming power. It is a very real structure that shapes how Latina/o youth present themselves. It is therefore important that Latina/o youth receive supportive performances from white youth, teachers, administrators, and community members that work toward “‘redoing’ whiteness – rethinking it, reshaping it” (Bucholtz, 2011, p. 246). The responsibility of combatting white supremacy at SHS should not and must not fall solely on Latina/o youth, it also falls upon the white community to learn about their whiteness, to create spaces to critically examine their privilege and how to be an ally to others. The arc of this dissertation has hopefully illuminated the difficult terrain Latina/o youth must traverse to survive. Often, as the preceding chapters have illuminated Latina/o youth feel like they are visitors to a school that is supposed to be their home. We must do better, Latina/o youth should not just be performing their identities to survive.

In a conversation with Mr. Velasquez he shared with me, “surviving to thrive.” His comment has stuck with me in that this is something educators should be striving for in their work with youth. Lisa Cacho (2012) writes about how living to survive is not living, she writes, “To be ineligible for personhood is a form of social death; it not only defines who does not matter, it also makes mattering meaningful” (p. 6). To be denied one’s existence, to be ignored is

a form of death. Therefore, any initiatives aimed at helping Latina/o youth must chart new paths, paths that are uncompromising that do not yield to those with privilege. “Contemporary progressive politics must rely not only on what dominant groups find palatable (i.e., family, legality) but also on the “value practices” that will make social statuses recognizable as valuable to (and often for) the very privileged of U.S. society” (Cacho, 2012, p. 31). Cacho asks us to be bold in how we move forward, to ask for an alternative is vital. Often, we are told that solutions are impractical, but is it impractical to start this process with the recognition of someone’s humanity, language culture, and identity? Cacho compels us to think about suspending the need to be practical. Cacho (2012) writes:

If we suspend the need to be practical, we might be able to see what is possible differently. A focus on social death enables us to start at the places we dare not go because it enables us to privilege populations who are most frequently and most easily disavowed, those who are regularly regarded with contempt, those whose interests are bracketed at best because to address their needs in meaningful ways requires taking a step beyond what is palatable, practical, and possible” (p. 31-32).

If we take that time to consider what’s possible we will begin tackling the questions and topics that make us most uncomfortable. By starting with the acknowledge of trauma, *las heridas*<sup>48</sup> Latina/o youth live with we can to make meaningful progress. Departing from this would be to not acknowledge what Latina/o youth at SHS go through regularly.

To conclude, I turn to Plato’s *Allegory of the Cave* to have us think more critically about what we can do collectively to affirm and support the identities of Latina/o youth. In the *Allegory of the Cave*, Plato presents a conversation between his brother Glaucon and his mentor Socrates

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<sup>48</sup> Translation: the wounds

that delves into the power of education. In the cave, Socrates talks about a group of people who live in darkness, who are bound, who can only look at the wall in front of them. Behind them is a fire they cannot see that projects shadows onto the wall, creating the only reality they know.

When those in the cave get out, they are confronted with a different reality, with a different set of facts, raising the important question of what will we do when we are confronted with different perspectives? Will we shun them away, will we denounce them, will we ignore them? Or will we listen? When we are confronted with the realities of Latina/o youth, when we are presented with the possessive nature of white supremacy, what will we do? Rather than shun away these facts, rather than dismiss them as anecdotal, I ask that we listen to what Latina/o youth at SHS have to say. Latina/o youth are tired of having to constantly perform for you, they are in search of affirmation. They are in search of acceptance for who they are not for what you want them to be. They are in search of spaces to perform for themselves. In these uncertain times, let us commit ourselves relentlessly, to not acquiesce to the powers that be, *todo por delante*<sup>49</sup>, we owe that much to Latina/o youth. Their performances are worthy of our attention, they are worthy of so much more, if only we would take notice.

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<sup>49</sup> Translation: All hands-on deck

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## **APPENDIX A**

### **Interview Questions**

#### **Community**

4. How long have you been living in your community?
5. Have you lived anywhere else? If so, where did you live before and for how long?
  - a. What led your family to move?
6. How would you describe your community?

#### **Family**

1. What does an average weekday/weekend look like for you?
2. How does your family make a living?
3. Where were your parents/guardians born?
  - a. If your parents/guardians were not born in the U.S., when did they arrive to this country?
4. Does your family go back to their home country? If so how often?
5. Do you have a job?
  - a. If so, what do you do?
  - b. If so, how long have you worked at your current job? How many hours do you work per week?
6. Do you speak any other language(s) other than English If so, what are they?
7. What language(s) do you speak with your parents/guardians primarily?
8. Which language are you most comfortable speaking? Please explain.
9. In your family, are there expectations related to your culture, about how you should act? If so, what are some of those expectations?
  - a. How do these expectations make you feel?

#### **School**

4. Which elementary and middle school did you attend?
5. How would you describe your high school (e.g. academically, socially, etc.)?
6. How do you think white students would describe your high school?

7. How would you describe your relationships with school staff (teachers, coaches, counselors, etc.)?
8. How do you get to and from school?
9. Tell me about the students who go to your high school? How would you describe them?
10. Can you talk about aspects of school that you like?
  - a. Can you talk about aspects of school that you don't like?
11. Who do you hangout with in school?
12. How would you describe your friends?
  - a. What do you have in common?
  - b. What makes you different from your friends?
13. How long have you known your friends?
14. What kinds of things do you do together at school?
  - a. What kinds of things do you do together outside of school?
15. Recalling your first days in high school, what was it like meeting new people? Was it hard making new friends?
  - a. If not, why was it easy to make new friends?
  - b. If so, can you describe why it was difficult to make new friends?
16. Who hangs with whom at school?
17. Are there times where you belong and don't belong at school? Please explain.
18. Are you a member of any clubs, teams, or any other organizations at school?
  - a. If yes, what are they?
  - b. How long have you been involved?
  - c. What is your position within this particular organization?
19. Throughout your time in high school what other activities have you been a part of?
20. What motivated you to be involved in school activities?
  - a. If not involved in activities, what are your reasons for not being involved?
21. What do you like about your favorite class?
22. What don't you like about your least favorite class?
23. What are some of the problems in your high school?



24. Do you think the school could do anything to fix the problem(s) you mentioned?
25. Do you think some students get better treatment than others?
  - a. If so why?
  - b. If so, who are these students?
26. Do other students ever talk about issues of race, class, gender, or sexuality?
  - a. If yes, what do they talk about?
  - b. If no, why do you think they don't?

### **Identity**

8. How would you describe yourself?
9. Would you say that being \_\_\_\_\_ is important to you? If so, why?
10. Can you think of times in your life that being \_\_\_\_\_ has been more important or less important?
11. Are there times in school that you feel you are treated differently than others because of who you are? Please explain.
  - a. If so, how did that make you feel?
  - b. If not, to what do you attribute that?
12. Do you feel like you are supposed to act differently around different people (e.g. teachers, students, friends) in school? Why or why not?
13. Tell me about your fashion style?
  - a. What are the clothes people wear at school?
14. Tell me about the music you like to listen, what do you like?

## APPENDIX B

### Extracurricular Activities and Initiatives for Latina/o Youth

#### College Access Programs

**Greenberg Achievers Program.** Founded by a wealthy corporate executive, the Greenberg Achievers Program is in place in several high schools in the Chicagoland area. The program has the explicit mission of supporting high achieving and motivated students from underrepresented backgrounds gain access to and succeed at select liberal arts colleges and universities. The Greenberg Achievers come from low-income families, are first generation college bound, and/or are students of color. The program believes that if high achieving students are to excel in top colleges and universities they must be motivated, have access to academic and enrichment programs, be knowledgeable about their college options, and obtain financial aid. Students in the program are nominated in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade and encouraged to apply. If students are interested in applying, they are asked to attend student and family sessions where they learn more about the program and receive an application. If students make it past the review process, they and their parents are asked to interview. If a student is not accepted, they can re-apply after their freshman year. Of the 19 participants in the study, eight (*Esther, Lissette, Camilla, Jackie, J. Cole, Richard, Liliana, and Michelle*) were part of this program. During their senior year, *Jackie and Liliana* left the program.

**SOAR.** Another non-profit organization that recruits students from low and moderate-income families. Students are paired with a trained coach who helps them navigate through the college admissions process, including entrance exams and college visits. These mentors continue to coach the students during their four years at college, and students can obtain up to \$4,000 in scholarship funding each year. The not-for-profit organization is community based and community supported. During the second year of the study, student council's annual Pledge Drive helped fundraise \$201,000 for SOAR. This organization has a small physical presence at SHS. They have one small office that is staffed by a representative who meets with students in the program. Of the 19 participants in the study, four (*Sofia, Hannah, Abigail, and MacDaddy*) were part of this program.

**LINK.** Started by the counseling department to help fill a void Greenberg and SOAR do not fill, LINK targets students who are not labeled as high performing but try to succeed in school. These are students in their view that would benefit from support, particularly early on in their high school career to attend workshops and go on college visits. The program has check in meetings with students involved in the program, but do not receive one-one-one support like Greenberg and SOAR provide. Students in LINK can be part of college access programs as well.

**Project Puente.** A branch of a non-profit organization in the community, Project Puente aims at offering Latina/o youth opportunities to get connected with employment and volunteer options in the area. Moreover, the program runs weekly workshops on identity, financial aid, college application process, socio-emotional issues among others. Students in the program are also allowed to be part of other college access program. The program runs out of SHS during after school hours. Of the 19 participants two (*Abigail and Bob the Builder*) were part of this program.

## **Counseling Support Groups**

Operating in the school's drop-in room. The Drop-in is a room where students at SHS can stop by if they need socio-emotional support from counselors, social workers, or school psychologists. In this space, the counseling department in the school also run support groups for varied groups. There are four groups specifically for Latina/o youth. The Latino support group met on Fridays on a rotating schedule. The Latino support group had four sessions on Fridays, one for each age cohort. This group would talk about academic identity, socio-emotional issues, masculinity, political issues, etc. The Latina support group ran similarly to the Latino support group but ran their meetings on Mondays. Students were identified based on recommendation from teachers or individual recruitment. Attending meetings were optional, but most always had a steady number of 10-15 students. The English Language Learner group also met and delved into issues like the previous two groups, but also provided space to talk about their adjustment to the school and their linguistic identities. The Dreamer and ally support group started during the second year of data collection and was run by a school social worker and college counselor. The group provided a space for youth to talk and learn about DACA, immigration policies, politics, and also provided an opportunity to work to educate others in the building.

## **Extracurricular Activities**

Latina/o youth at SHS were involved in varied after school activities. The list below is of clubs Latina/o youth were mainly involved in.

- Chess Club
- DJ Club
- Latinos Unidos
- Latino College Bowl
- Race & Equity
- Latin Dance
- Rotary
- National Hispanic Institute

With sports, Latina/o youth were involved mainly in soccer, to the next largest bloc were involved in girls gymnastics, boys wrestling, track and field and cross country. Latina/o youth were involved in other sports but were typically one of two students in those respective sports.